Brick Foundations: North Indian Brick Temple Architecture and Terracotta Art of the Fourth to Sixth Centuries CE

A dissertation submitted to Cardiff University in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Cardiff University
and the
British Museum
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Abstract

The thesis aims to develop an understanding of the nature and evolution of brick temple architecture in the subcontinent, focusing in particular on terraced Hindu structures of the fourth to sixth centuries CE. It also seeks to advance understanding of the iconography and artistry of the terracotta relief panels that once graced the outer walls or platforms of Gupta period brick temples. To date, scholarship on Hindu temple architecture of the Gupta period has primarily focused on cave and structural stone temples, while brick temple architecture of the epoch, along with terracotta reliefs and sculptures, have largely been confined to the margins of historical studies. This approach has led to the formation of a somewhat distorted picture of the architectural landscape of the Gupta period.

To address this shortcoming, all of the known terraced structures in the subcontinent have been mapped in order to establish an understanding of the development and dissemination of this mode of architecture. The architectural form and relief sculpture of the vast terraced brick Śaiva monument known as ACI or Bhimgaja, situated at the heart of the ancient fortress city of Ahichhatrā in Uttar Pradesh, forms the main case study for the thesis - with architecture being the subject of the first half of the thesis. ACI is compared with a terraced brick Vaiṣṇava structure at Pawāyā in Madhya Pradesh, formerly the Nāga centre of Padmāvatī, and with the only standing brick temple of the Gupta period, at Bhītargāon in Uttar Pradesh. Despite the scale and complexity of the former two monuments, neither has received adequate scholarship. A series of fifth- and early sixth-century CE ornamental terracotta pilaster and frieze fragments from Ahichhatrā, held in the reserve collections of the British Museum, are examined within the context of Gupta period temple architecture; the objective being to determine where each of the fragments would have been positioned on a temple. On the basis of these artefacts and related pieces from the site, it is possible to build up a picture of the type of décor that would have adorned the exterior of ACI.

The many intriguing sculptures and relief fragments from Pawāyā and Ahichhatrā are the subject of the second half of the thesis. Some of the reliefs - especially those hailing from ACI - are of great importance since they represent some of the earliest visual depictions of myths contained in the *Mahābhārata* and other religious texts. These reliefs and sculptures are explored within the broader context of Gupta iconography, with particular attention paid to the numerous and fascinating terracotta reliefs of the era, most of which are divorced from their original settings. Moreover, based on style and scale, some of panels evidently share the same origin and these are collated here. In addition, new interpretations are proposed for several of the plaques.

Acknowledgements

This research was made possible through the funding of the Arts and Humanities Research Council to whom I am very grateful. Moreover, I would like to express my thanks to the British Museum and the Welsh School of Architecture for their grants, which helped towards my fieldwork and conference trips.

On many occasions during my fieldwork in India, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has extended their help. In particular I would like to thank Dr. Bhuvan Vikrama; fortuitously excavations were taking place at Ahichhatrā under his direction during my two visits to the site and he generously facilitated my stay and answered my many questions. Many thanks too, to Daljeet Soraya who showed me around the ancient citadel, to Pushpa Pandey who accompanied me on my first visit to the Ahichhatrā, and to all the wonderful residents from neighbouring Rāmnagar who took such good care of us and made these trips even more memorable.

Thanks are owed to the directors and curators of the museums at Bhopal, Allahabad, Lucknow and Delhi, who allowed me to photograph and measure artefacts in their reserve collections, and to the ASI for giving me access to the photo archives in Janpath.

My trips around India have been made even more enjoyable because of the ever-gracious hospitality of my dear friends Diane and Rahul Rai and their family; Saurabh and Laxmi Saxena and their parents; and the countless other people who have hosted me. I also fondly remember Amit and his father who insisted on waiting for hours on a cold night when my train at Bareilly Station was delayed.

Heartfelt thanks to the many scholars who have given their precious time to discuss various aspects of my work. In particular, to Prof. Alexis Sanderson, who has so generously shared his knowledge and also hosted me at All Souls College, Oxford; and to Prof. Hans Bakker, who has read and advised on sections of my work and taken an interest in my progress, and whose own work has been important for this thesis. Thanks too, to Dr. Jason Hawkes for editing my paper on Pawāyā, and to Dr. David Smith who advised me on the Pawāyā chapter. My gratitude to Dr. Peter Sharrock and Swati Chemburkar for keeping me informed about their work on Kesariyā and Borobudur. I am sincerely grateful to Dr. Simon Brodbeck for offering many invaluable and detailed suggestions on numerous aspects of my thesis, and likewise, to Prof. Anna Dallapiccola for her comments and encouragement. Prof. Adam Hardy, who supervised this project, has been continuously kind, very patient and full of good advice, and has taught me much of what I know about Indian architecture; while, my second

supervisor, Dr. Michael Willis, gave me the opportunity to spend time behind the scenes at the British Museum, has answered my endless questions, and like Adam, has inspired me. Thanks are also owed to Dr. Crispin Branfoot who introduced me to the subject of Indian temple architecture and whose enthusiasm rubbed off. It should also be mentioned here that Peter Sharrock, Michael Willis, Coline Lefrancq, Swati Chemburkar, Bhuvan Vikrama and Adam Hardy all contributed photographs for this thesis.

Lastly, I would like to express love and gratitude to my friends and family, most especially to my father who patiently read through the thesis and has been my unofficial ‘third supervisor’ throughout, and to my very-much adored husband Tom, who has shared my enthusiasm in this project, made numerous insightful suggestions, supported me endlessly and on one occasion accompanied me across India.

To my mother

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Part One

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Aims of the Thesis and Research Questions

The British Museum houses a number of beautiful ornamental terracotta bricks and sculptural relief fragments dating from the fifth and early sixth centuries CE in its reserve collections. These artefacts, which hail from the ancient walled city of Ahichhatrā, Bareilly District, Uttar Pradesh, are the point of departure for this research.

Ahichhatrā was once the capital of northern Pañcāla, one of the great kingdoms or *mahājanapadas* of early India. During the Gupta period (*c*. 319-520 CE) the city was made a *bhukti*, or regional headquarters of the empire.[1] Each of the ornamental bricks originates from an architectural element, such as a frieze or pilaster, which would have adorned the exterior of a brick temple. Only structural foundations have survived at the site, along with the ruins of two vast, spectacular, monumental pyramidal brick edifices known as ACI (or Bhimgaja) and ACII, situated at the heart of the now uninhabited ancient citadel. These structures date from between the fourth and sixth centuries CE and were originally crowned with temples dedicated to Śiva. During excavation of the two monuments in the early 1940s, numerous ornamental bricks similar to those housed in the British Museum were unearthed, along with many sculptural fragments. These findings suggest that the walls of the platforms were once ornamented with pilasters, friezes and exuberant figurative terracotta plaques. The formal qualities of ACI and ACII are distinct from the mainstream proto-*Nāgara* mode of architecture, the precursor of the temple type that has dominated the architectural landscape of North India for more than a millennium. Contemporaneous pyramidal brick Hindu monuments are located at Pawāyā (ancient Padmāvatī) in Madhya Pradesh, and at Mansar in Maharashtra, while a seventh century terraced structure is situated at Aphṣāḍ in Bihar. Moreover, numerous Buddhist *stūpas* elevated on similar multi-tiered bases are scattered across the northern and eastern regions of the subcontinent.

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[1] Parmanand Gupta, *Geography from Ancient Indian Coins and Seals* (New Delhi: Concept Publications, 1989), pp. 101-102.

The core aims of this thesis are twofold: firstly, to develop an understanding of the nature and evolution of terraced brick temple architecture in the subcontinent, focusing especially on Hindu structures of the Gupta period; and secondly, to advance our scholarly knowledge of the iconography and artistry of the terracotta relief panels that once graced the outer walls or platforms of Gupta period brick temples. The formal qualities of the Bhimgaja (ACI) monument at Ahichhatrā, along with its superb terracotta relief sculptures, will constitute the main case study for the thesis, with the terraced Viṣṇu monument at Pawāyā being the subject of a smaller, comparative case study. Despite the importance of both Ahichhatrā and Padmāvatī in early India, neither of the archaeological sites has benefited from much scholarship of a deeply inquiring nature, at least as far as the monuments are concerned. In addition, scholarship on Hindu temple architecture of the Gupta period predominantly focuses on small cave and structural stone temples, while brick temple architecture of the epoch is often confined to the margins of historical studies, or bypassed altogether. This approach has led to the formation of a somewhat distorted picture of the architectural landscape of the Gupta period, which this current work hopes to address. In re-imagining the sacred art and architecture of the Gupta period by drawing attention to its diversity, this thesis makes a significant contribution to scholarship.

Although a comprehensive understanding of the original form of the temples at Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā is beyond the scope of this thesis, the formal qualities of the structures will be explored within the limits imposed. This will be the most illuminating and thorough analysis of the monuments to date, and it is hoped that this study will contribute considerably to the limited corpus of scholarship on Gupta period brick temple architecture. The thesis will include relevant architectural material spanning a timeframe of around fourteen hundred years with the intention of furthering an understanding of monumental pyramidal architecture as a genre, while maintaining a central focus on the Gupta period.

The Gupta age has played a significant role in the history of South Asian art, most especially because it was at this time that Hindu iconography was formalised. However, with the exception of a handful of studies, the figurative terracotta art of the period, though often possessed of manifold qualities such as a sense of immediacy and playfulness, has rarely been afforded anything like the same status as stone sculpture. In particular, narrative terracotta relief sculpture is hugely diverse as well as being instructive regarding the Gupta period, and attention will be paid here to a number of fascinating panels illustrating Śaiva themes and myths from the epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*. This thesis will include a new reading of many fourth to sixth century terracotta panels, stone sculptures and relief carvings, with the primary goal of developing a better understanding of some of the more obscure works from Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā. By collating the relevant scholarship, by placing the terracottas within the wider context of their surroundings and of Gupta art as a whole, and by drawing conclusions – or at the very least, raising pertinent questions – this thesis makes a further important contribution to scholarship. Lastly, the limits of this thesis are determined by the poor condition of the monuments in question, by the absence of excavation reports, by the fact that few terracotta relief panels are found *in situ* and by the shortage of earlier scholarship on these subjects.

The principle questions addressed in this thesis are as follows:

- What was the origin of the terraced temple type in the subcontinent, and how did this mode of architecture evolve and become disseminated?
- To what extent can the formal qualities of ACI at Ahichhatrā and the Viṣṇu monument at Pawāyā be understood? Moreover, how do the structures compare with one another, with the brick temple at Bhītargāon, and with other multi-tiered monuments in the subcontinent?
- What is the nature of each of the recorded ornamental brick fragments from Ahichhatrā, and to what kind of architectural articulation did they belong?
- How do the brick motifs compare and contrast with similar ornamental motifs on other Gupta period monuments?
- What are the key characteristics of Gupta period terracotta relief sculpture, and where do the terracottas from Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā fit into this oeuvre?
- What are the themes and myths represented in the surviving terracotta fragments and stone sculptures from Pawāyā and do they convey a political message?

- To what extent can we understand the characters and themes represented in the several large terracotta plaques from ACI, and how do they fit into the wider contexts of Ahichhatrā and of Gupta period iconography?

Methodology

This thesis was approached for the most part from an art historical point of view, with sculptures and monuments generally acting as the primary sources. Thus, the point of departure for my research has always been a work of art, a monument or an ornamental architectural fragment. In the words of Donald Preziosi, '…works of "art"– are uniquely privileged in the degree to which they are able to communicate, symbolize, express, or embody certain deep or fundamental truths about their makers or sources, whether that be a single person or an entire culture or people.'[2] For the study of art and architecture to be truly insightful and scientific, and in some cases to be understood at all, however, other sources and disciplines must be brought into the fold. This is even more important when studying the material culture of a society of which relatively little is known. My research then, draws on archaeological records, secular and religious ancient texts and accounts, scholarship on texts and rituals, inscriptions, numismatics, landscape and early trade routes, with the intention of building a rich and layered understanding of the temples and sculptures in question, which hopefully in turn sheds some further light on Gupta society.

Research for this thesis began in the vaults of the British Museum, measuring, photographing and drawing the twenty-six ornamental brick and sculptural fragments from Ahichhatrā, which to date, have never been displayed. Besides this, the opportunity was taken to examine comparable pieces in the museum's collections. Field trips were conducted to Ahichhatrā, Pawāyā and Bhītargāon, as well as to other fifth and sixth century sites including Udayagiri, Mansar, Ramtek, Sārnāth, Sāñcī, Khanderia and Ajaṇṭā, and places of architectural interest such as Elephanta, Vidiśā and Ellorā, the purpose being to build up an understanding of early Indian

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[2] Preziosi, Donald, 'Art as History', in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Donald Preziosi (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 21-30 (p. 21).

architecture. Several days were spent in 2011 and again in 2012 at Ahichhatrā, hosted on the site by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) who were excavating there at the time. This afforded a unique opportunity to explore the temple and parts of the extensive city. Moreover, I was able to witness some of the newly uncovered temple foundations dating from the Kuṣāṇa and early medieval periods, which have since been re-buried. Communication with some of the archaeologists is ongoing and their findings have informed this research. Measurements were also taken of the structures and fragments at Ahichhatrā, Pawāyā and Bhītargāon, and brick sizes have been compared.

Museums, and sometimes their reserve collections, were visited in Bhopal, Gwalior, Delhi, Lucknow, Kota, Mathurā, Allahabad, Sārnāth and Nagpur with the objective of measuring and photographing often unpublished pieces from Ahichhatrā, Pawāyā, and other fourth, fifth and sixth century brick temples. Some particularly successful days were spent at the ASI Photo Archives in Janpath, New Delhi, which houses several large albums of photographs taken during the archaeological excavations of the terraced temples at Ahichhatrā in the 1940s. As no reports were ever published, this photographic record has benefited my research immensely; even more so as ACI and ACII have regularly undergone well-meaning but ultimately disfiguring conservation work since their excavation. Likewise, V. S. Agrawala’s catalogue on the *Terracotta Figurines of Ahichchhatrā* (1948), which records figurative terracottas found during the 1940s excavations, has been of significant importance in formulating an understanding of the art of the ancient city and the religious leanings of its inhabitants during the Gupta period. Alexander Cunningham’s survey report of Ahichhatrā (1862) with its accompanying map and drawings has proved invaluable in developing a picture of the ancient city before it underwent extensive excavation. Moreover, the foundations of the temple that once surmounted the terraces of ACI were still extant at the time of his visit, and his brief description of the structure has allowed me to formulate a considerably clearer understanding of the shrine and upper terrace of ACI than would have otherwise been possible.

A number of brief reports were written during the excavation of the structure at Pawāyā by the archaeologist M. B. Garde, who also published a few pre- and post-excavation photographs of the monument and other findings. As with ACI and ACII, the Pawāyā monument has undergone extensive renovation since its excavation and the photographs have enabled me to develop a better understanding of how the temple would have looked originally.

For comparative material, the photographic collections of South Asian temple architecture and sculpture at the British Library, the online Huntington Archive, the photographic database of the American Institute of Indian Studies, Adam Hardy's photographs and several online museum catalogues have all likewise proved to be excellent resources. Alongside relevant scholarship and archaeology reports, poetry and plays written by authors such as Kālidāsa, Vatsabhaṭṭi and Bāṇabhaṭṭa (fifth to seventh centuries CE) have been consulted. Moreover, early eyewitness accounts written by the Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang are referred to. Religious texts, epics and instruction manuals (known as Vedas, Purāṇas, Śāstras and Sūtras) – a number of them put into writing at around the time of the Gupta period – have proved indispensable to the development of an understanding of the myths and characters represented in terracotta plaques and stone sculptures from Ahichhatrā, Pawāyā and elsewhere. Lastly, maps, illustrations and plans have been made where it was felt necessary to bring further clarity to an argument. Unless otherwise acknowledged, the photographs, maps and drawings included in this thesis are my own.

Chronology of the Gupta Dynasty

Much of the art and architecture explored in this thesis dates to the Gupta period, and thus it is useful to outline the chronology of the dynasty here. The *naissance* of the Gupta dynasty is obscure, and it is thought that the early Guptas ruled in Magadha, possibly having Pāṭaliputra (modern day Patna) as their first capital.[3] The earliest recorded king of the dynasty is Mahārājā Gupta (*c.* 295-300)[4], followed by Ghatotkace (*c.* 300-19). The empire, however, came into being under Ghatotkace's son, Candragupta I (*c.* 319-50) who was styled *mahārājādhirāja*, or supreme king of

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[3] Ashvini Agrawal, *Rise and Fall of the Imperial Guptas* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), p. 79.

[4] S. R. Goyal, *A History of the Imperial Guptas* (Allahabad: Central Book Depot, 1967), p. 403.

great kings. Candragupta married Kumāradevī of the Licchavi dynasty, a clan who ruled over areas of what is now northeast India and Nepal. This was a strategic move, and the territory of the Guptas expanded, covering the Allahabad region, eastern Magadha (modern day Bihar) and Sāketa (the region surrounding Lucknow).[5] The following *mahārājādhirāja*, Samudragupta (*c.* 350-76), whose capital might have been Kauśāmbī,[6] exercised considerable military might and greatly expanded the Gupta territory.

1.1. A gold coin from the reign of Samudragupta, depicting on the obverse face a horse beside a sacrificial post (yūpa), signifying the aśvamedha. On the reverse face is a haloed woman carrying a fly-whisk and standing on a lotus. Photograph courtesy of the British Museum.[7]

By the close of his reign, the empire spanned almost the entirety of North India, excluding the western regions. Samudragupta's exploits are recorded in the Allahabad *praśasti* inscribed onto an Aśokan pillar (3rd century BCE), possibly in a conscious

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[5] Joanna G. Williams, *The Art of Gupta India - Empire and Province* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 22.

[6] Ibid., p. 36.

[7] The coin celebrating Samudragupta's *aśvamēdha* depicts a sacrificial horse on the obverse and a female goddess-like figure on the reverse. Steven E. Lindquist draws attention to the singularity of a Gupta coin issued by the king and yet seemingly not depicting the king. Lindquist reaches the conclusion (based on the instructions for the sacrifice in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, Chapter XIII) that the horse ritually becomes the king throughout the duration of the year-long sacrifice. Thus, the horse illustrated on the coin is essentially an image both of Samudragupta and of the horse. The female on the reverse is simultaneously a depiction of the goddess Lakṣmī (Śrī) standing on a lotus, and Samudragupta's queen holding a fly-whisk – an article used to fan the horse before he is sacrificed. See Steven E. Lindquist, 'Enigmatic Numismatics: Kings, Horses, and the *Aśvamēdha* Coin-type', *South Asian Studies*, 19 (2003), pp. 105-112.

attempt to liken the *mahārājādhirāja* to another great empire builder, Aśoka Maurya.[8] According to the *praśasti*, one of Samudragupta's proudest achievements was the vanquishing of three Nāga kings, thought to be the rulers of Ahichhatrā, Mathurā and Padmāvatī.[9] Importantly too, Samudragupta was the first of the Gupta rulers to perform the illustrious year long *aśvamedha*, or horse sacrifice,[10] a ritual connected with territorial expansion and power, and one of the most exalted of the seven royal *Soma* sacrifices (a subset of Vedic rituals) (Fig.1.1).[11]

The kingdom next passed to Samudragupta's son Rāmagupta (r. *c*. 376), whose reign was short-lived and tumultuous. Within a year of his accession to the throne, his younger brother Candragupta II (*c*. 376-415) appears to have carried out a *coup d'etat*, and married Rāmagupta's wife Dhruvadevī. If we are to believe Viśākhadatta's version of events in his play, the *Devīcandragupta* – dating to *circa* the post-Gupta period – Rāmagupta surrendered his wife to the Śakas in the west, an act of cowardice which so outraged the future Candragupta II that he killed the ruler of the Śakas and heroically rescued Dhruvadevī.[12] Like Samudragupta, Candragupta II – known by the epithets *paramabhāgavata* (devotee of Viṣṇu) and *Vikramāditya* (one who is like the sun in valour) – was also a powerful and effective leader (Fig. 1.2). By 400 CE he had succeeded in conquering the Śakas and incorporating their territory into the Gupta Empire.[13] Significantly, Candragupta II formed an alliance with the Nāga dynasty through his marriage to Kuberanāgā.[14] Moreover, in *c.* 380 CE he married off his daughter, Prabhāvatīguptā, to Rudrasena II of the neighbouring Vākāṭaka dynasty.[15] After the untimely death of Rudrasena in *c*. 385 CE, Prabhāvatīguptā was made regent

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[8] Ibid., pp. 22-23.

[9] John F. Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and their Successors, L. 21*, ed. by B. Chhabra and G. S. Gai (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1981, first edn 1888), p. 13.

[10] Directions for carrying out an *aśvamedha* are given in the *Yajurveda* (TS 7.1-5, VSM 22-25); the ritual is also described in the *Ṛgveda* (1.162-63) and in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* XIII. In summary, the horse, after being anointed, is free to wander for twelve months with an entourage of officials in tow. Any territory entered by the horse is supposed to be annexed, and at the end of the year an extravagant sacrifice is conducted.

[11] Michael Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual, Temples and the Establishment of the Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 183.

[12] See Hans Bakker, 'A Theatre of Broken Dreams, Vidiśā in the Days of Gupta Hegemony', in *Interrogating History: Essays for Hermann Kulke*, ed. by Martin Brandtner and Shishir Kumar Panda (Delhi: Manohar, 2006), pp. 165-87.

[13] Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, p. 26.

[14] Agrawal, *Rise and Fall*, p. 167.

[15] Ibid., pp. 167-168.

for the interim period before her sons reached maturity.[16] Thus, good relations were maintained between the Gupta and Vākāṭaka dynasties for at least a generation.[17] Notably, it was during Candragupta II's reign that the Gupta artistic style really came into its own.[18]

1.2. A gold coin depicting on the obverse face Candragupta II holding a bow in his left hand and an arrow in his right hand; and on the reverse face, the goddess Lakṣmī seated on a lotus. Photograph courtesy of the British Museum.

The next ruler on the throne was the *mahārājādhirāja* Kumāragupta I (*c*. 415-447), also known as *mahendrāditya* (Fig. 1.3). He appears to have enjoyed a relatively long and peaceful reign, although one that was marked by political stagnation.[19] Kumāragupta I also performed the *aśvamedha*, and a freestanding stone horse supposedly commemorating the event is displayed in the Lucknow State Museum.[20] Several scholars including Goyal and Williams assert that Kumāragupta I's reign

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[16] Goyal, p. 405.

[17] Agrawal, *Rise and Fall*, p. 168.

[18] Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, p. 27.

[19] Ibid., p. 63.

[20] Inscriptions in "shell script" are carved on the back and neck of the stone horse found at Khairigarh, Kheri District, Uttar Pradesh. B. N. Mukherjee (1981) has suggested a partial translation of this inscription which he claims to have deciphered by likening some of the characters to Brāhmī script. Mukherjee read the script on the horse's back as *Śrīmahendrāditya* (Kumāragupta I), and the script on the neck of the horse as *aśv(o)rasa…yājino…sya*. Thus, Mukherjee reached the conclusion that this horse commemorates the *aśvamedha* which, according to numismatic evidence, the ruler is known to have performed. In Richard Salomon's view, however, this reading is highly implausible considering that Mukherjee mistakenly read the script upside-down. See Richard Salomon, 'A Recent Claim to Decipherment of the "Shell Script"', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 107 (1987), pp. 313-315.

culminated in *c.* 454 or 455;[21] however, it appears that the ruler died some time around 448 CE. The succession following Kumāragupta's death was far from smooth. There was a struggle for power between the latter's brother, Ghaṭotkacagupta, and his illegitimate son Skandagupta. Initially, Ghaṭotkacagupta won the struggle and ruled for about eight years, but eventually met his end at the hands of Skandagupta. To justify assassinating his uncle Ghaṭotkacagupta, Skandagupta is said to have compared him to Kaṃsa, the tyrannical uncle of Lord Kṛṣṇa.[22]

1.3. Gold coin depicting on the obverse face a haloed Kumāragupta standing in profile with a Garuḍa standard to his left; and on the reverse face, the goddess Lakṣmī seated on a lotus. Photograph courtesy of the British Museum.

Skandagupta ruled until 567 CE, and although he seems to have been a relatively strong king, as was demonstrated by his keeping the Hūṇas from Central Asia at bay, this period marked the beginning of the Guptas' decline, since repeated battles were severely depleting the empire's coffers.[23] The throne next passed to Narasiṃhagupta (*c.* 467-74), the son of Skandagupta's half brother Purugupta. Narasiṃhagupta's influence might have been largely restricted to eastern India.[24] Narasiṃhagupta's son, Kumāragupta II, briefly succeeded to the throne in around 474 CE, and was quite possibly overthrown by Budhagupta (*c.* 477-488). The latter's reign is recorded in a

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[21] See Goyal, p. 405; and Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, pp. 63-64.
[22] Michael Willis, 'Later Gupta History: Inscriptions, Coins and Historical Ideology', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 15 (2005), pp. 131-150 (p. 137).
[23] Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, p. 65.
[24] Willis, 'Later Gupta History', p. 138.

pillar at Eraṇ, which has an unusual capital explored in Chapter 10, depicting addorsed images of Viṣṇu's vehicle Garuḍa. Vainyagupta (*c.* 488-508) (Fig. 1.4) and Viṣṇugupta (*c.* 508-515) (Fig. 1.5) are believed to be the last two kings of the Gupta dynasty, but little is known of them.[25]

1.4. A gold coin from the reign of Vainyagupta, depicting on the obverse face the haloed king standing in profile with a Garuḍa standard to his left; and on the reverse face, the goddess Lakṣmī seated on a lotus. This coin was found in West Bengal and may have been part of the Kalighat Hoard (Kolkata). Photograph courtesy of the British Museum.

1.5. A gold coin depicting on the obverse face a haloed Viṣṇugupta standing in profile with a Garuḍa standard to his left and an arrow in his right hand; and on the reverse face, the goddess Lakṣmī seated on a lotus. Photograph courtesy of the British Museum.

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[25] Ibid., p. 145.

Financial strain, a diminished authority or even loss of authority over large swathes of the kingdom, and the constant threat of the invading Hūṇas, whose own territory continued to expand, together contributed to the fall of this once great empire.

1.6. An inscribed Kuṣāṇa period red sandstone sculpture retrieved from the village of Rāmnagar, adjoining Ahichhatrā. Based on the type of stone used and the style of the sculpture, we can be confident that the image was brought to the city from Mathurā. The sculpture is now on display in the National Museum, New Delhi. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

Though not political centres, Mathurā and Sārnāth were the artistic capitals of northern India during the Gupta period and exerted considerable influence in terms of religious iconography and style. Mathurā in particular was a centre of artistic production on a monumental scale; moreover, its sculpture was of an exceptionally fine quality and was often exported to other cities in the north such as Ahichhatrā (Fig. 1.6). Although no standing Gupta temples have been found in Mathurā, a multitude of ornate architectural fragments from the area have survived, which indicate that some of the most exquisite temples of the period must have been located here.

How Golden Was the Gupta Age?

Since the nineteenth century, the majority of scholarship on the history and art of the Gupta epoch has included at its core the question of whether or not the Gupta period was a Golden Age, or simply the assumption that it was. Around a hundred and fifty years later this discourse shows no signs of abating. Indeed, the most recent major exhibition of Gupta art, held at the Musée Guimet in 2007, had both the words 'golden' and 'classical' in its title; and only last year a talk was given by Robert Brown at the British Museum on the subject of 'Gupta Period Art: The Classical Movement?' (2014). Since my thesis is primarily concerned with the art and architecture of the Gupta era, it is necessary to consider, however briefly, the extent of the 'goldenness' of the Gupta age and how this accolade has overshadowed certain other periods, in addition to contemporary kingdoms in the subcontinent and those that came directly before and after – in particular the early medieval.[26] The aim of this discussion is to understand how the Gupta age is perceived within the wider context of Indian art history, as a result of which, analysis of the art and architecture of the epoch in the following chapters will be further enriched.

To clarify before continuing our discussion, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a *golden age* as either 'an idyllic, often imaginary past time of peace, prosperity, and

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[26] Jason Hawkes considers the early medieval period, which he dates between the 6th and 12th centuries CE, to be noticeably under-represented when it comes to archaeological research. See Jason Hawkes, 'Chronological Sequences and the Problem of Early Medieval Settlement in India', *Purātattva*, 44 (2014), pp. 208-228 (p. 208).

happiness' or 'the period when a specified art or activity is at its peak.'[27] The term *classical*, aside from its association with ancient Greece or Rome, can be used to describe 'an exemplary standard within a traditional and long-established form or style' or, 'the first significant period of an area of study.'[28] In my view, the very idea of a Golden Age appears to be naïve and fanciful, and is often evoked to serve a political motive. David Lorenzen describes how the notion of the Gupta period as a Golden Age has, paradoxically, served the agendas of both nationalist ideologists and British imperialists alike.[29] Just as the Guptas had referred to the example of the Mauryas, so the British imperialists appropriated the Gupta Empire as an example of a centralised and unified society that mirrored their own goals of territorial expansion and the establishment of a more stable and 'enlightened' country.[30] As an example, Vincent A. Smith wrote in 1924 that, 'in the fourth century light again dawns, the veil of oblivion is lifted, and the history of India regains unity and interest.'[31] His comment implies that India was living through a dark age prior to the formation of the Gupta Empire – which was hardly the case. To nationalist ideologues, meanwhile, the Gupta period has signified a time in history when large swathes of India were united by powerful, magnanimous and indigenous Hindu rulers, under whom the arts, sciences, mathematics, philosophy, religious institutions and economy not only flourished but also had lasting impact.

When arguing in favour of the 'goldenness' of the Gupta age, the Chinese pilgrim Faxian, who travelled in India during the early fifth century CE, is often cited. Although his account largely focuses on the Buddhist institutions and practices of the period, he also describes how the people of the kingdom:

> … are numerous and happy; they have not to register their households, or attend to any magistrates and their rules; only those who cultivate the royal land have to pay (a portion of) the gain from it. If they want to go, they go; if they want to stay

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[27] *Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English*, ed. by Catherine Soanes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 2nd edn. rev.), p. 475.

[28] Ibid., p. 194.

[29] David N. Lorenzen, 'Historians and the Gupta Empire', in *Reappraising Gupta History for S. R. Goyal*, ed. by B. Ch. Chhabra, P. K. Agrawala, Ashwini Agrawal and Shankar Goyal (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1992), pp. 47-61 (p. 49).

[30] Ibid., p. 53. Michael Willis describes how V. A. Smith, to make the Gupta period appear more golden, adjusted the chronology of the Gupta rulers in order to forge a smooth succession from one king to the next, leaving out some of the more troubling characters such as Ghaṭotkacagupta. See Willis, 'Later Gupta History', pp. 142-143.

[31] Cited in Lorenzen, p. 50.

> on, they stay. The king governs without decapitation or (other) corporeal punishments. Criminals are simply fined, lightly or heavily, according to the circumstances (of each case). Even in cases of wicked rebellion, they only have their right hands cut off. The king's body-guards and attendants all have salaries.[32]

This relatively utopian vision has to be understood in relation to Faxian's experience of growing up in the then more oppressive and authoritarian China. The following words of Faxian, however, do little to support the idea of the Gupta period as a Golden Age, although we should be careful about evaluating a distant time based on the ideals of today:

> Throughout the whole country the people do not kill any living creature, nor drink intoxicating drink, nor eat onions or garlic. The only exception is that of the Chaṇḍālas. That is the name for those who are (held to be) wicked men, and live apart from others. When they enter the gate of a city or a market place, they strike a piece of wood to make themselves known, so that men know and avoid them, and do not come into contact with them. In that country they do not keep pigs and fowls, and do not sell live cattle; in buying and selling commodities they use cowries. Only the Chaṇḍālas are fishermen and hunters, and sell flesh meat.[33]

Our knowledge both of the historical events of the Gupta period and its political and social structures is fairly limited, and we are heavily reliant on short inscriptions, often recording donations; longer (and obsequious) pillar inscriptions; and legends on coins. It is these very limitations, however, that have enabled an idyllic vision of the period to take root, arguably at the expense of historic fact.

As mentioned above, one of the most significant consequences of designating the Gupta period a Golden Age is that it throws other kingdoms and their sometimes masterful achievements into the shadows. Art and architecture, for example, also reached great heights under the neighbouring and contemporaneous Vākāṭakas, while the spirited art of the expansive and relatively long-lived Kuṣāṇa Empire (1st -3rd centuries CE) heavily influenced that of the Guptas. As Romila Thapar rightly points

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[32] *Faxian, A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms*, trans. by James Legge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), pp. 42-43.
[33] Ibid., pp. 42-43.

out, ‘classicism has a long gestation period’,[34] and while we might concede that the Gupta period was a Classical Age, it was not the only such Age in Indian history. There can be no doubt, though, that this was a time of bountiful creativity, significant advancement and learning in many different fields. Among the notable personalities of this period, for example, are the poet and playwright, Kālidāsa, the celebrated astrologer and astronomer, Varāhamihira (505-587 CE), the physician, Dhanvantari, and the mathematician, Āryabhaṭa (476-550 CE). The Hindu and Buddhist art of the Gupta period, at its best, is often perceived to have reached a near formal perfection; moreover, narrative compositions are generally lively, balanced and endowed with a captivating sense of immediacy. Significantly too, it was largely during this era that lasting iconographic conventions were established, and both the artistic style and iconography that were formalised during the Gupta period spread beyond the borders of the subcontinent into China and overseas to Southeast Asia. Within India, the Gupta style proved to be influential for a considerable length of time after the demise of the empire. The Gupta era also played an important role in the history of India’s sacred architecture, especially since the earliest structural stone temples were built during this period. In addition, some Gupta monuments can be described as prototypes for the mainstream style of *Nāgara* architecture that flourished in North India from around the seventh century CE.

The Gupta period played an instrumental role in the development of art and architecture in India and thus the importance of conducting research on this epoch cannot be underestimated. It might be added, though, that to develop a clearer and more mature understanding of the extent of the contribution made by the Guptas in the fields of art and architecture in Indian history, considerably more research is needed on the early medieval – in particular on the post-Gupta period, while more studies on the Hindu art of the Kuṣāṇa period are also to be desired.

Outline of Chapters

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[34] Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to 1300 AD* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 281.

In order to achieve the aims outlined at the start of the chapter, this thesis has been divided into two parts: architecture and archaeology will be addressed first, and iconography second. Chapter 2 is dedicated to introducing the stone and brick temple architecture of the Gupta era, with a detailed study made of the only surviving brick temple of the period, located at Bhītargāon in the Kanpur District of Uttar Pradesh. This monument is fascinating in its own right, and, critically, plays a pivotal role in the formation of an understanding of the structures at Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā. Despite being the only standing Gupta period brick temple, it fortuitously shares some strikingly similar features with the latter structures, particularly in terms of its ornamental brickwork. Rather than studying brick monuments in isolation, an overview of cave temples and freestanding stone temples is necessarily included in the chapter, in order to build a well-rounded picture of architecture in the Gupta period. This exercise also highlights how distinct much of the surviving brick architecture of the period is from its stone counterparts, especially in terms of scale. Incidentally, the differences in style between stone and brick architecture are usually minimal in later periods.

The purpose of Chapter 3 is to explore the development and significance of terraced architecture in the subcontinent, and to lay the groundwork for establishing how the monuments at Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā fit into the genre. The pyramidal structures of both Hindu and Buddhist affiliation located across the length and breadth of the subcontinent will be mapped here in order to understand the emergence, evolution and dissemination of this mode of architecture. Chapter 3 will also question why the Śaivas and Vaiṣṇavas adopted this mode of architecture, which had developed within Buddhism. Keeping in mind the exploration of Gupta brick architecture in Chapter 2, it will become increasingly apparent that the architectural landscape of fourth, fifth and sixth century India was more diverse than has been widely understood, with brick architecture largely following its own trajectory. A summary of each of the terraced structures – apart from those explored in the main body of the thesis – is included in the Appendix.

In Chapter 4 the focus will turn to the history of Padmāvatī and to the formal qualities of its multi-tiered Viṣṇu monument. Although it has lost its shrine, the latter structure has retained some interesting ornamental brickwork, which bears, to some extent, a resemblance to Buddhist Gandhāran architecture, and also to a number of architectural features illustrated in the many Kuṣāṇa period relief carvings from Mathurā. Significantly, the monument may be the earliest surviving Brahmanical terraced structure; and moreover, it has the best preserved of all early Hindu brick temple bases, and is therefore very valuable in terms of South Asian architectural history.

The aim of Chapter 5 is to provide a historical and religious context for the study of the archaeology and architecture at Ahichhatrā, which will be explored in Chapter 6, and for the art of the city, examined in Chapter 11. This chapter will begin with an introduction to the literature on Pañcāla and its northern capital, Ahichhatrā. The fragmentary history of the city, which is extracted mostly from short inscriptions, or mentions in religious and philosophical texts, will then be discussed. These references suggest that the city was a bustling hub of trade, religion and learning in the last few centuries BCE and early centuries CE. Next, the chronology of the settlement at the ancient city – in as far as it can be understood – and the possible reasons for its demise, will be outlined. Śaivism at Ahichhatrā will also be examined in this chapter due to the affiliation of the terraced monuments ACI and ACII, and also in view of the seventh century Chinese pilgrim Xungzang's description of the city as being home to a large number of ash-sprinkling Śaivas.[35]

The archaeological history and sacred architecture at Ahichhatrā will be examined in Chapter 6, with the end goal being to reconstruct ACI theoretically in so far as is possible in light of the manifold limitations mentioned earlier in the Introduction. At least six largely undocumented archaeological excavations have taken place at Ahichhatrā over the past 150 years, and although no full reports have ever been published, a number of short reports have informed this chapter, together with my field research and exchange of communications with Dr. Bhuvan Vikrama, who was responsible for conducting the most recent excavations at the site. The landscape, city walls, surrounding areas and water sources at the site will be discussed in order to

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[35] *'Si-Yu-Ki': Buddhists Records of the Western World, Translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsiang (A.D. 629)*, trans. by Samuel Beal, (London: Trübner & Co., 1906), pp. 200-201.

gain a better understanding of this ancient city and the immediate environs of the terraced monuments. Lastly, the chapter will explore the Brahmanical mounds for which the most information is available. ACI will be examined at length and hypotheses will be offered for the type of temple that once surmounted the structure and for the form of the platforms.

Chapter 7 is centred on the artefacts that originally inspired this PhD project; namely, a group of ornamental terracotta bricks from Ahichhatrā stored in the reserve collections of the British Museum. During the course of this research many more bricks from the site have been documented. The purpose of this chapter is to develop an understanding of where each of the bricks would have been situated on a temple façade. This objective will be achieved by comparing the ornamental bricks with similar examples from other stone and brick temples of the Gupta era. Additionally, a brief history of some of the motifs featured on the bricks from Ahichhatrā will be given. This exercise will serve to demonstrate the widespread nature of the motifs, and moreover, the origin of many of the motifs in wooden architecture. It will also draw attention to the surprising level of continuity in the use of particular motifs in sacred architecture from around the time of the Mauryas until the Gupta period where the study ends.

Part Two of the thesis begins with Chapter 8. This chapter will start by outlining the literature on both South Asian terracotta art and on Gupta art in general. Aside from introducing the relevant scholarship, this review will also enable an understanding to be formed of the processes that are involved in the making of terracotta sculptures. Next, the emergence of the Gupta style, its key characteristics and regional differences will be explored here with the objective of providing a backdrop against which to later analyse the sculptures at Ahichhatrā, Pawāyā and other brick temple sites.

Chapter 9 addresses the Hindu iconography of the Gupta-Vākāṭaka age, focusing largely on depictions of some of the popular myths or deities which also feature at Ahichhatrā, Pawāyā, Bhītargāon and at other brick temple sites of the period. These deities and myths are explored under the headings Vaiṣṇava Images and Śaiva

Images. Here, the objective is to develop a thorough iconographic context for a detailed exploration of the terracotta plaques and sculptures from Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā in Chapters 11 and 12. Chapter 9 also provides an opportunity to examine a number of fascinating Gupta terracotta plaques, some with no recorded find spot. Although it has never been acknowledged, it is evident that several of these panels – a number of them depicting scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* – share a common origin, and they will be explored here as a group for the first time. A new reading of the plaques is given where necessary (and where possible).

Chapter 10 focuses on the early Gupta period terracotta relief fragments and stone sculptures from the Viṣṇu temple at Pawāyā. To date, the terracottas have received very little scholarly attention, probably because of their fragmented condition. Bearing in mind the stylistic and iconographic contexts provided by Chapters 8 and 9, this chapter aims to uncover – in as far as is possible – the themes that were depicted on this temple by examining the terracottas. Moreover, some of the stone sculptures from the temple are rare or even unique, and a new reading will be offered of the pieces where necessary.

The principle aim of Chapter 11 is to examine the obscure iconography of a series of eleven terracotta plaques from Ahichhatrā ACI – a number of them highly unusual and few of them representative of the mainstream temple iconography of the day. In part, these plaques are important because among them are representations of the earliest surviving depictions of myths from texts such as the *Mahābhārata* and *Skandapurāṇa*. Despite their intriguing nature and significance, the plaques have attracted little scholarly attention – and, moreover, have mostly been misinterpreted. A new reading of the plaques will be given where necessary, although a conclusive identification has not been possible in all cases. In order to shed light on the type of gods and goddesses popular in the ancient city, the chapter will begin with an overview of fifth and sixth century sculptures found at the site, followed by a study of the life-size Gaṅgā and Yamunā sculptures from ACI.

Lastly, the results of the thesis will be synthesised and discussed in Chapter 12.

Part One

Chapter 2: Temple Architecture of the Gupta Period

Introduction

> The foundation of Hindu temple architecture was laid during the Gupta age in a period when the structural potentiality of dressed stone had just fully been appreciated … Pressure to give the temple an architectural form was aided by the philosophical and religious urge of the age, with its accent on bhakti (adoration of the personalised deity, or iṣṭadēvatā), which enjoined the installation and worship of such popular divinities as the yakṣa, nāga, Vāsudēva, Viṣṇu, Varāha, Narasiṃha, Śiva, Skanda, the Buddha, or a Jina.[1]

Freestanding stone temples, cave temples, a brick temple and numerous brick and stone foundations survive from the Gupta period – though few are well preserved. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the most intact of these structures with the aim of providing an architectural context within which to explore the monuments at Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā (Fig. 2.1).

A number of Gupta period temples, such as the Daśāvatāra temple at Deogaṛh, are prototypes for the mainstream style of *Nāgara* architecture that was to dominate the North Indian landscape from around the seventh century CE onwards.[2] In contrast, the brick monuments at Bhītargāon, Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā, for example, and the slightly later brick temples at Sirpur, Rājim and Bodhgayā, do not fall into the category of proto-*Nāgara* temple architecture[3] but rather followed separate trajectories that eventually petered out. About the Bhītargāon temple Cunningham writes:

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[1] Krishna Deva, 'Guptas and Their Feudatories', in the *Encyclopedia of Indian Temple Architecture – North India, Foundations of North Indian Style c.250 B.C. – A.D. 1100*, ed. by Michael W. Meister, M.A. Dhaky and Krishna Deva (Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies, Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 19-59 (p. 22).

[2] For a detailed analysis of the five *Nāgara* temple types see Adam Hardy, *The Temple Architecture of India* (Chichester: Wiley Academy, 2007).

[3] Adam Hardy, 'The Brick Shiva Temple at Kalayat in the Context of Nagara Temple Architecture', in *Harayana Cultural Heritage Guide*, ed. by Shikha Jain and Dandona Bhawna (New Delhi: INTACH with Aryan Books International, 2012), p. 24-32 (p. 26).

> In its general outline, and in the arrangement of the bands of ornament and sculpture, the brick temple of Bhitargaon approaches nearer to the brick temple of Bodh-Gaya than to the stone temples of a later age.[4]

The temple at Bhītargāon serves as a particularly important point of reference for the case studies in this thesis, and, as such, will be considered in detail at the end of the chapter. The ruins of a recently 'discovered' brick and stone Gupta period temple situated in a rural location near the small village of Khanderia in District Bundi, Rajasthan, will also be investigated at length as no scholarly report has yet been published on the findings.

Cave Temples

There are twenty excavated cave temples piercing the sandstone outcrop at Udayagiri in the Vidiśā District of Madhya Pradesh. Some of the temples are quite plain or at least severely eroded, while others, although not considered architecturally ambitious, are beautifully ornamented. Most of the temples have a shrine comprising either a cave or simply a recess in the rock wall, and a pillared portico, or at least the traces of one. The earliest temple – Cave 1 – dates to around the late fourth century CE and is partly rock-cut and partly structural. It consists of a dark cave serving as the *garbhagṛha* (sanctum), with a small, pillared portico attached. The earliest dated temple of the Gupta period is Cave 6, dedicated to Śiva, and inaugurated in 401 CE during the reign of Candragupta II (Fig. 2.2).[5] The shrine has a simple "T"-shaped doorframe, which, as Deva describes, derives from wooden architecture.[6] At the top of each of the pilastered doorjambs is a relief carving of a sinuous river goddess (Fig. 2.4). The door lintel is adorned with dentils carved with human heads above which is an eave embellished with three *candraśālās* (representations of dormer windows) with faces peering out of them.

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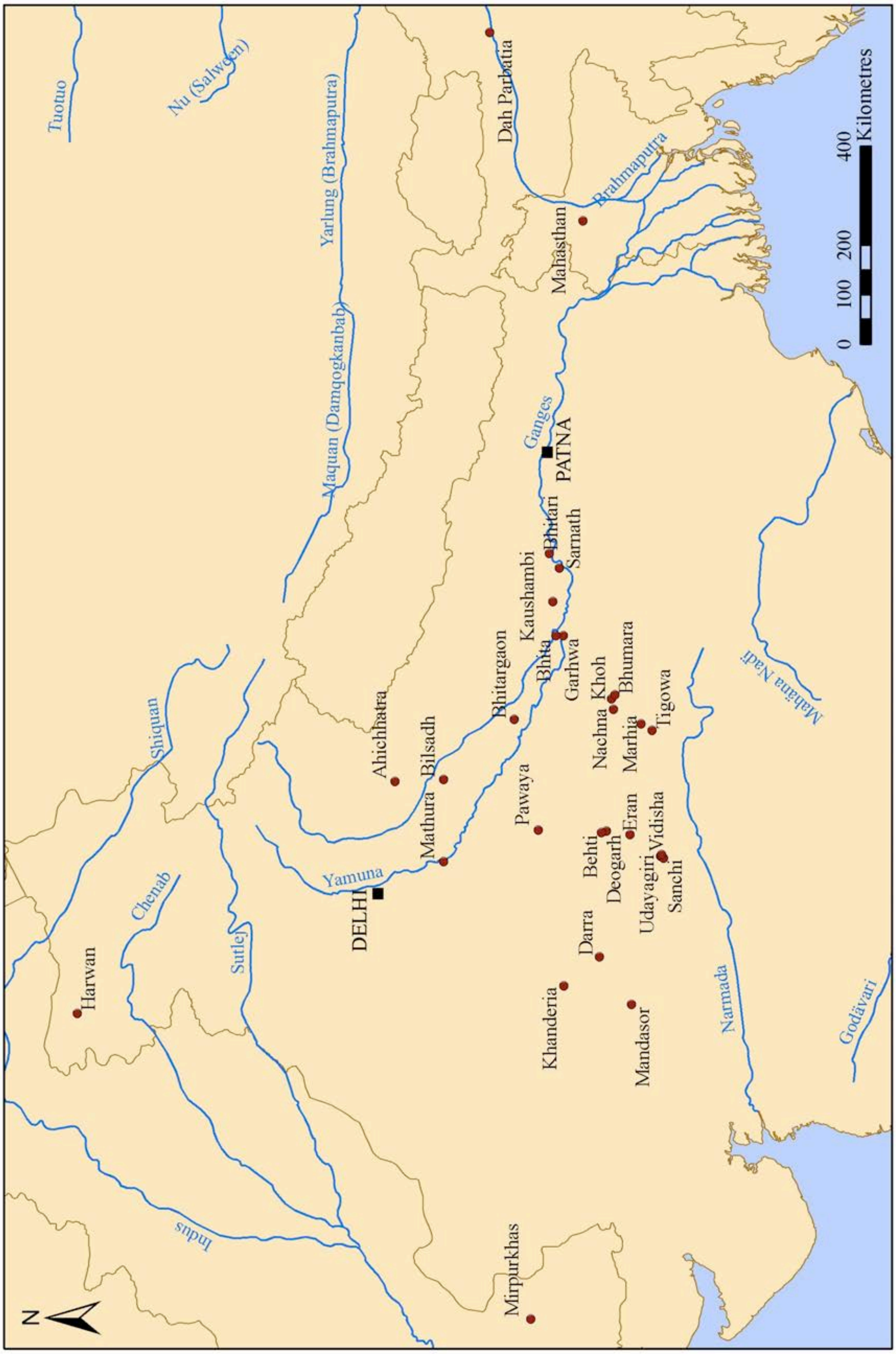
[4] Alexander Cunningham, *Report of Tours in the Gangetic Provinces from Badaon to Bihar in 1875-76 and 1877-78* (Calcutta: Archaeological Survey of India, 1880), p. 43.

[5] V. S. Agrawala, *Gupta Art* Vol. II (Varanasi: Prithivi Prakashan, 1977), p. 68.

[6] Deva, p. 23.

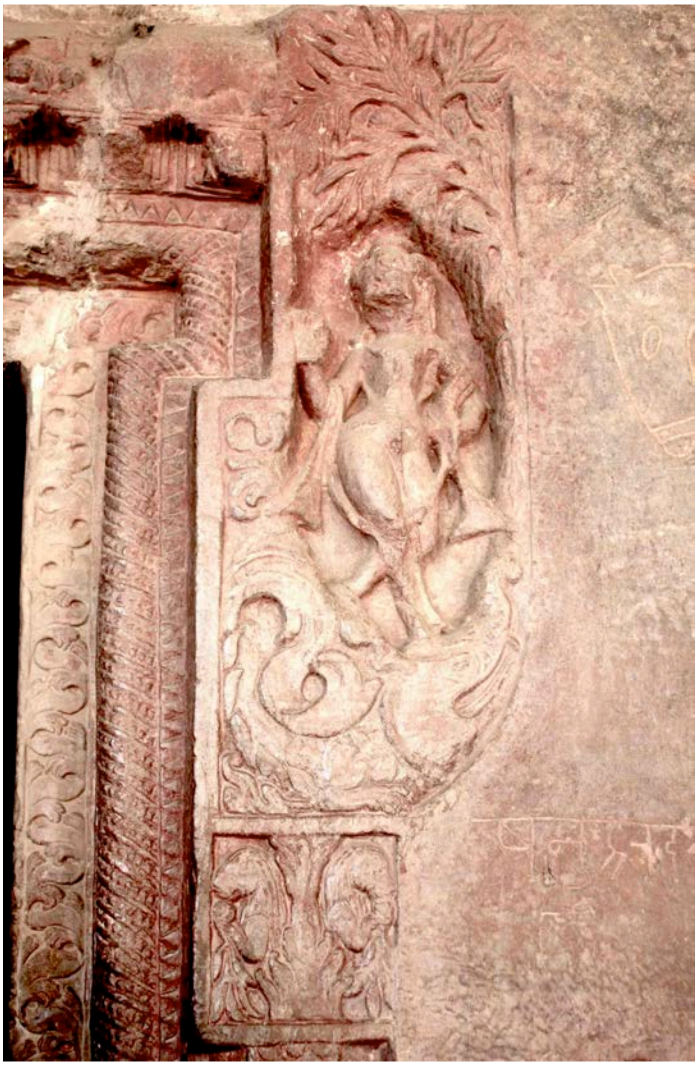


2.1. Map showing the Gupta archaeological sites mentioned in this chapter.

Flanking the entrance are *dvārapālas* or door guardians leaning nonchalantly on their spears. Images of Viṣṇu, Gaṇeśa and the fierce goddess, Mahiṣāsuramardinī, are also depicted on the outer walls of the temple, while a Śiva *liṅga* is enshrined in the cave (Fig. 2.3). Adjacent to Cave 6 is a Mātṛkā, or mother goddess shrine (Fig. 2.5).

2.2. On the left: corner of Cave 5 at Udayagiri, and on the right: Cave 6.

2.3. Relief sculptures to the right hand side of the entrance to Cave 6 at Udayagiri.



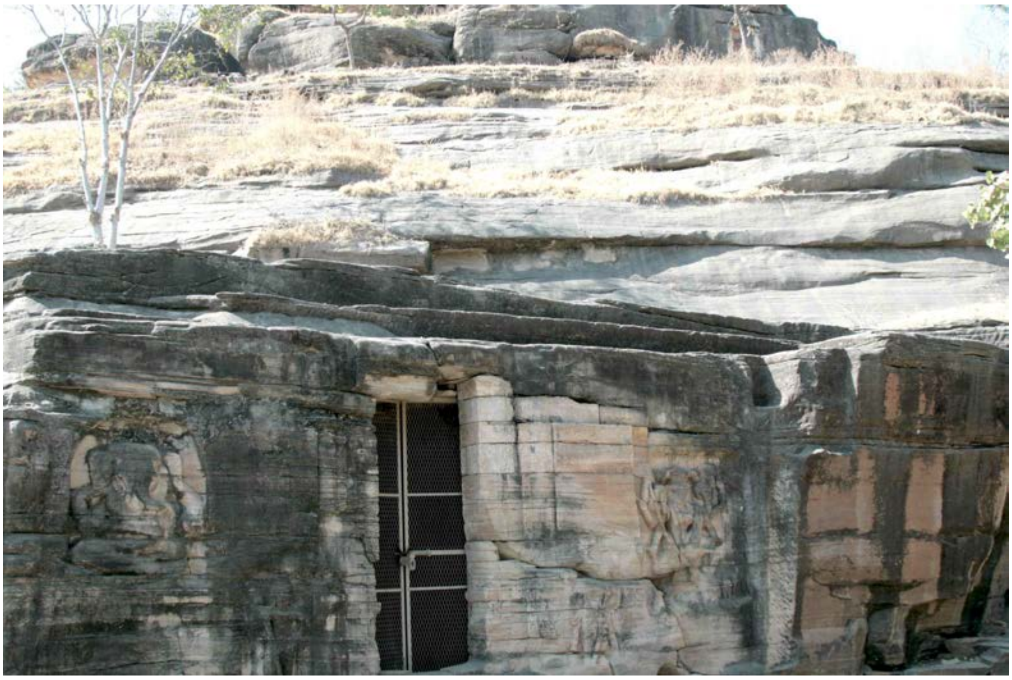
2.4. *Upper right side of the entrance to Cave 6 at Udayagiri.*

2.5. *Mātṛkā shrine adjoining Cave 6 at Udayagiri.*

Cave 4 also houses a *liṅga* and dates to the early fifth century CE (Fig. 6). The “T”-shaped doorframe is more elaborate than that of Cave 6, with the doorjambs and crossbar divided into several bands bearing floral motifs with a few *candraśālās* situated along one of the door lintels. Fragmented *dvārapālas* flank the doorway, and framing the temple are two substantial pilasters, which would have formed part of a portico. Like Cave 6, Cave 4 also has an adjoining Mātṛkā shrine.

2.6. Cave 4 at Udayagiri.

The most striking of the caves is no. 5, dedicated to Viṣṇu in his Varāha *avatāra* (boar form). This cave will be discussed at length in Chapter 9. Likewise, Cave 13, which bears a monumental carving in high relief of Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa reclining on his serpent Ananta, will also be explored in Chapter 9. Cave 3 enshrines an image of Kārttikeya (Fig. 2.7). Flanking the entrance are pilaster fragments while a deep groove above the doorway suggests that there was once a portico here. The most architecturally advanced cave is no. 19 (Fig. 2.8), which contains four substantial pillars inside its rock cut interior (Fig. 2.9). In the midst of the pillars is a monolithic pedestal supporting a *liṅga*. The doorframe of the temple is ornate; the doorjambs are divided into several bands, as is the door lintel. Above the lintel is a relief carving depicting the Ocean of Milk myth, a scene also illustrated on a stone gateway lintel from Pawāyā explored in Chapter 10 (Fig. 2.10). In front of the shrine stand the ruins of a *maṇḍapa* (pavilion) composed of nine-pillared bays.



2.7. The worn façade of Cave 3 at Udayagiri. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

2.8. Cave 19 at Udayagiri. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

2.9. Inside Cave 19 at Udayagiri. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

2.10. Upper part of doorframe around the entrance to Cave 19 at Udayagiri.

Freestanding Stone Temples

Prior to the advent of structural temples, Hindu shrines had generally consisted of open platforms – sometimes surrounded by railings – upon which deities were worshipped.[7] In the early centuries CE, Buddhist images were often enclosed on three sides in simple flat-roofed cells or shelters called *gandhakuṭī*. V. S. Agrawala describes the *gandhakuṭī* as the precursor of the *garbhagṛha* or temple *sanctum sanctorum*.[8] The earliest surviving structural temples built from blocks of stone date to the Gupta period. Michael Meister describes these as being 'hardly more than artificial caves.'[9] Most of these temples are located in Mālwa (present day Madhya Pradesh and parts of Rajasthan), while many of the brick temples, or brick foundations of the Gupta era, are situated to the north and east, in the Gangetic valleys. The great Buddhist site of Sāñcī, in the Raisen District of Madhya Pradesh, located only 13 kilometres from Udayagiri, is home to the late fourth or early fifth century Temple 17 – the earliest freestanding temple surviving from this era (Figs. 2.11 and 2.12).[10] This simple flat-roofed monument consists of a square sanctum (*garbhagṛha*), which would have housed the image, and a pillared portico raised on a base of three courses. The internal and external walls of the sanctum are unadorned, with the four pillars, two pilasters and doorframe providing the only ornamentation. Each of the pillars and pilasters has a campaniform lotus capital reminiscent of earlier Buddhist architecture. On every capital sits an abacus bearing on each face, a relief carving of trees flanked by couchant lions (Fig. 2.13). As with the other stone temples of this period, no mortar has been used.[11] The doorframe is "T"-shaped and is missing some of its ornamentation. The doorjambs bear two floral bands and small pilasters (Fig. 2.14).

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[7] Agrawala, *Gupta Art,* p. 63.

[8] Ibid., p. 65.

[9] Michael W. Meister, 'A Note on the Superstructure at Maṛhiā', *Artibus Asiae*, 36 (1974), pp. 81-88 (p. 81).

[10] T. Richard Blurton, *Hindu Art* (London: British Museum Press, 1992), p. 5.

[11] Agrawala, *Gupta Art*, p. 68.

2.11. Temple 17 at Sāñcī.

2.12. View of Temple 17 at Sāñcī from the front.

2.13. Couchant lions on a pillar at Temple 17, Sāñcī.

2.14. Right side of entrance to Temple 17 at Sāñcī.

The so-called Kaṅkālī Devī temple at Tigowā in Jabalpur District, Madhya Pradesh, is located approximately 240 km to the northeast of the latter site and is remarkably similar to Temple 17 (Fig. 2.15). The slightly later flat-roofed temple comprises a plain, square sanctum and pillared portico. The sidewalls of the portico were once open as with Temple 17, but additional walls and narrative relief panels were added at a later date. The *ghaṭa-pallava* (vase and foliage) style pillars are more ornate than those at Sāñcī. Each abacus has five courses in a roughly diamond-shaped formation. The faces are carved with single trees flanked by couchant lions. The "T"-shaped doorframe of the temple is not markedly more developed than that of the Sāñcī temple. The doorjambs consist of floral bands and pilasters with a river goddess depicted on either side in the upper register. The door lintel is adorned with a repeat dentil motif.

2.15. Kaṅkālī Devī temple at Tigowā. Photograph Courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

As the Gupta period progressed, stone temples were elevated on plinths or platforms known as *jagatī*s. In addition, a number of temples were given *śikharas* or towers. The ruins of a pale ochre sandstone temple dating to *circa* the mid-fifth century, known as Bhīm-kī-caurī, stands in the village of Darrā (also called Mukhandarā), Kota District, in Rajasthan (Figs. 2.16 and 2.17). Only the skeleton of the temple survives, and is situated on a substantial *jagatī* measuring 22 m along the east-west axis and 14 m from north to south.[12]

2.16. The Bhīm-kī-caurī temple at Darrā. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

2.17. The Bhīm-kī-caurī temple at Darrā. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

The temple, which faces east, has lost all of its walls, much of its ceiling and many other architectural components. Deva describes the shrine as consisting of a hall with four *rucaka* pillars and ten peripheral pilasters. Two shorter pillars mark the entrance

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[12] Jagat Narayan and K. L. Mankodi, 'The Case of the Bhim ki Chauri Ruins at Mukandara', *Marg*, 62 (2010), pp. 80-91 (p. 83).

to the shrine. The temple once had a *śikhara*, which Deva suggests might have been composed of ‘a series of kapōta-tiers embellished with candraśālās, crowned by an āmalaka, and with āmalakas also on the corners of the lowermost tier.’[13] Three *candraśālās* were found in the vicinity of the temple, two of which are on display at the Kota Museum (Figs. 2.18 and 2.19).[14]

2.18. Candraśālā from the Bhīm-kī-caurī temple at Darrā housed in the Kota Museum. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

The lintels, pillar capitals and other architectural fragments are beautifully ornamented and, indeed, this temple must have been one of the loveliest in the Gupta kingdom. The motifs include convoluted *makaras*, interwoven vines, ropes, garlands, floral motifs and *gaṇas* (dwarf-like and often nude attendants of Śiva). In front of the temple was a *Nandi-maṇḍapa* (a pavilion to house Śiva’s bull vehicle) with four pillars.[15] Many of the missing parts of the Bhīm-kī-caurī temple have recently been located through the efforts of Tej Singh Mavei, Jagat Narayan and K. L. Mankodi. Their search brought them to an abandoned shrine in the village of Jhamra, three kilometres to the southwest, constructed largely from a mishmash of mouldings and

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[13] Deva, p. 30.

[14] An image of this beautiful *candraśālā* is reproduced in Narayan and Mankodi, p. 83.

[15] Deva, p. 30.

fragmented architectural elements from the Bhīm-kī-caurī temple. Some of the fragments evidently hail from doorjambs, while the lost ashlar stones that once formed the walls of the temple at Darrā have all been used here,[16] disproving a theory held by Meister and Williams that the walls were constructed using brick.[17]

2.19. Architectural fragment with candraśālās and kīrttimukha from the Bhīm-kī-caurī temple at Darrā. Kota Museum.

A red-sandstone Gupta period maṭh, dating to the second half of the fifth century, stands in an isolated location three kilometres from the village of Behṭi in the tehsil of Chanderi, Ashoknagar District, Madhya Pradesh (Fig. 2.20).[18] This temple is a relatively recent 'discovery' and is described at length by Michael Willis and Meera Dass (2007). The large square temple is constructed on a base of three courses. A substantial semi-circular parapet wall surrounds an ambulatory path around the structure and is drained by *makara* waterspouts.[19] The structure has no sanctum, just a hall with nine bays (*navaranga*) (like that of Cave 19 at Udayagiri) open on one side

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[16] Narayan and Mankodi, pp. 85-90.

[17] Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, p. 138; William's refers to Meister's theory in her footnotes on p. 138.

[18] Meera I. Dass and Michael Willis, 'The Gupta Temple at Behti: A New Find', *South Asian Studies*, 23 (2007), pp. 63-68 (p. 64).

[19] Ibid., p. 64.

(Fig. 2.21).[20] The lintel and pillar mouldings are intricate and skillfully executed. They depict motifs such as scrolling vines, bands of lion head dentils and *kīrttimukha*. The roof, which has retained some of its slabs, has a parapet but no *śikhara* (Fig. 2.22). The middle bay is open to the sky, and probably was from its inception.[21]

2.20. Temple at Behṭi. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

2.21. Pillared bays at Behṭi. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

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[20] Ibid., p. 65.
[21] Adam Hardy, Personal Communication.

2.22. Roof of the temple at Behṭi. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

The only stone shrine of the Gupta period to have retained part of a *śikhara in situ* is the so-called Daśāvatāra temple at Deogaṛh located in Lalitpur District, Uttar Pradesh (Fig. 2.23).

2.23. Daśāvatāra temple at Deogaṛh. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

The temple stands on a large *jagatī* (16.9 m. sq.), which has staircases on all four sides. The temple might be the earliest surviving monument to have a *pañcāyatana* plan, once having had a small subsidiary shrine on each corner of the platform.[22] The plain base mouldings of the *jagatī* rise up in four courses, and above this is a continuous frieze of rectangular panels with relief carvings interspersed with miniature pilasters (Fig. 2.24). Another frieze composed of smaller narrative panels was located around the parapet.[23]

2.24. Detail of the jagatī of the temple at Deogaṛh. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

The temple itself is square and has a magnificent "T"-shaped doorway on its west face, consisting of doorjambs and a lintel divided into several bands (Fig. 2.25). Breaking away from the tradition of having a sanctum with a bare exterior, a large and exquisite niche has been situated on three of the walls. The doorway and niches appear to have been shaded by overhanging canopies. The sumptuous relief sculpture at Deogaṛh will be explored in Chapters 8 and 9. Above the niches is a *kapota* (roll cornice) upon which sits a band of keyhole niches and a second *kapota* (Fig. 2.26).

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[22] For a theoretical reconstruction of the Daśāvatāra temple at Deogaṛh see Klaus Imig, 'Recherchen Über den Gupta-Tempel in Deogarh (Research on the Gupta Temple in Deogarh) [With English Summary]', *Artibus Asiae*, 63 (2003), pp. 35-68 (pp. 63-64).

[23] Madho Sarup Vats, *The Gupta Temple at Deogarh, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India No. 70* (New Delhi, Archaeological Survey of India, 1952), p. 5.

Only fragments of the *śikhara* have survived, largely composed of miniature aedicules of varying sizes having barrel-vaulted roofs, moreover, much of the *śikhara* in its current state is a reconstruction carried out by the ASI (Fig. 2.27).[24]

2.25. Entrance to the inner sanctum of the temple at Deogaṛh. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

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[24] For a theoretical reconstruction of the lower register of the Deogaṛh *śikhara* see Fig. 26 in Michael Meister, 'Prāsāda as Palace: Kūṭina Origins of the Nāgara Temple', *Artibus Asiae*, 49 (1988-1989), pp. 254-280.

2.26. Daśāvatāra temple at Deogaṛh. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

2.27. Large displaced fragments of the śikhara of the Daśāvatāra temple at Deogaṛh. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

At Nāchnā Kuṭhārā in Panna District, Madhya Pradesh, stands a red-sandstone temple, today affiliated with Pārvatī (Fig. 2.28). The monument dates to the early sixth century CE (late Gupta Period). The structure is interesting, although little of it now survives. Currently it consists of an almost square flat-roofed sanctum situated on a tall plinth. A photograph from the beginning of the twentieth century, however, captures the structure before restoration.[25] Like the brick temple at Bhītargāon, the Pārvatī temple had a second *cella* directly above the first. Moreover, the temple had a broad, covered *pradakṣiṇa-patha* (circumambulatory path) around the shrine, part of which can be seen in the early photograph. Unusually, the shrine has lattice windows on its sidewalls, bordered with bands of scrolling vines and other motifs (Fig. 2.29). Beneath both windows is a row of niches containing relief carvings depicting dancing *gaṇas*, some of whom are playing musical instruments. One of the miniature niches contains an image of a dancing Gaṇeśa, the elephant-headed son of Śiva and Pārvatī. The "T"- shaped doorway is composed of jambs and lintels carved with images of *mithunas* (loving couples), the river goddesses Gangā and Yamunā, Śiva and Pārvatī, floral and vegetal motifs and *candraśālās* (Fig. 2.30). A *maṇḍapa* may have been situated to the front of the shrine.

2.28. The Pārvatī temple at Nāchnā Kuṭhārā. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

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[25] This image is reproduced in Imig, Abb. 14.

2.29. Window in the wall of the Pārvatī temple at Nāchnā Kuṭhārā. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

2.30. Entrance to the Pārvatī temple at Nāchnā Kuṭhārā. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

2.31. *Śiva temple at Bhūmarā. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.*

2.32. *Door lintels above the entrance to the Śiva temple at Bhūmarā. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.*

A late Gupta period red-sandstone temple dedicated to Śiva is situated to the east of the village of Bhūmarā, located on a plateau in the district of Satna, Madhya Pradesh (Fig. 2.31).[26] The square sanctum, which faces east, sits on a tall *jagatī* with a parapet of the same style as that which borders the walkway around the monument at Behṭi (bevelled and rounded capping stones).[27] The internal and external walls of the sanctum are plain, while the entrance to the temple with its "T" shaped doorframe is beautifully ornamented (Fig. 2.32). The eye is immediately drawn to an elegant bust of Śiva located at the midpoint of the door lintel, flanked by *vidyādharas* (flying celestial beings) bearing garlands and offerings. R. D. Banerji published numerous photographs taken of the structure before restoration. From these images we can draw two conclusions: firstly, that the temple was found in a very poor and fragmentary condition, and looked to be on the verge of collapse. Secondly, that a large number of highly ornate architectural elements were found scattered around the temple including numerous exquisitely carved lintels, several *āmalakas*, *candraśālās*, frieze fragments (some of which are still attached to a fragment of a roll cornice), broken pillars and pilasters, a *makara* waterspout, sculptures including representations of Gaṇeśa, *gaṇas* and Śiva, and a magnificent *liṅga* which is now situated in the sanctum and is described in Chapter 9.[28] Thus, the temple was considerably more complex and ornate than it is today, and moreover, the restoration may not be entirely accurate. The nature of some of the fragments suggests that this temple had a *śikhara*, a pillared *maṇḍapa* (hall or pavilion), at least two subsidiary shrines, and a *jagatī* adorned with bands of relief panels, as we find at Deogaṛh.

The so-called Vāmana temple dating to the late fifth century is located near Maṛhiā Kālān in District Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh (Fig. 2.33). The square sanctum faces West and is situated on a square plinth (*jagatī*) found in a much-ruined state.[29] Aside from a base moulding, the walls of the temple are unadorned. The pink-sandstone jambs and lintels of the "T"-shaped doorframe are ornate and elegant (Fig. 2.34). Viṣṇu, depicted astride his half-eagle vehicle, Garuḍa, is portrayed at the centre of the door lintel.

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[26] R. D. Banerji, *The Temple of Śiva at Bhumara* (Calcutta: Archaeological Survey of India, 1924), pp. 1-2.

[27] Ibid., Plate XVII for a theoretical plan of the monument.

[28] Several of these fragments are on display at the State Museum, Allahabad.

[29] Pramod Chandra, 'A Vāmana Temple at Maṛhiā and Some Reflections on Gupta Architecture', *Artibus Asiae,* 32 (1970), pp. 125-145 (p. 126).

2.33. The Vāmana temple at Maṛhiā. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

2.34. Entrance to the Vāmana temple at Maṛhiā. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

2.35. Detail of the superstructure of the Vāmana temple at Maṛhiā. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

Above the wall proper or *jaṅghā* of the temple can be seen, in ascending order, a band of dentils; a frieze of lotus petals; a *kapota* (roll cornice); a recess adorned with a frieze of figurative and vegetal relief panels; a second band of dentils, this time carved with lion heads; a *chādya*-eave; a recessed band depicting miniature aedicules housing *gaṇas* flanked by empty key-hole niches (Fig. 2.35); and lastly a flat-roof with a parapet or balustrade with rounded capping stones and water spouts.[30] About the style of temple Meister writes:

> The Maṛhiā superstructure … seems to this author a rudimentary attempt to adapt one form of wood-brick architecture to the necessities of the stone cell, but one not attempting to be a tower of any sort, and one which in no real way anticipates either the pyramidal tower at Bodh Gaya or Aihole temple No. 10 (as Dr. Chandra suggests) nor the developed *nāgara śikhara* [mainstream north Indian style temple tower].[31]

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[30] Meister, ‘A Note on the Superstructure’, pp. 82-87.

[31] Ibid., p. 82.

Numerous stone architectural fragments or temple ruins dating to the Gupta period have also been found at Mathurā, Bilsaḍh and Garhwa (or Gaḍhwā) in Uttar Pradesh, Eraṇ, Khoh, Sākor, and the Vidiśā region of Madhya Pradesh, at Dah Parbatiā in Assam, and elsewhere.

Brick Temples

Despite the prevalence of sacred brick architecture in the Gupta and post-Gupta periods, most scholarship on early South Asian architecture focuses instead on the better-preserved stone and cave temples. Indeed, it could be argued that on the whole there is more appreciation for stone architecture, as Ellen Raven remarks:

> It seems as if - in the eye of the modern beholder - only building in stone, rather than in perishable materials or brick, counts as 'true' temple architecture.[32]

For nineteenth-century British archaeologists and historians based in the subcontinent, the Classical orders of ancient Greece and Rome, embodied in stone temples and amphitheaters, constituted the yardstick by which all other architecture was measured.[33] Hence, the uncommonly understated stone Temple 17 at Sāñcī was held in particularly high regard. James Fergusson encapsulates the attitude of the day when comparing the merits of stone and wood. The latter, he comments:

> … fails ... in producing that impression of durability which is so essential to architectural effect; while, at the same time, the facility with which it can be carved and adorned tends to produce a barbaric splendour far less satisfactory than the more sober forms necessitated by the employment of the less tractable material.[34]

Brick was not always viewed as an inferior material, though. Indeed, Stella Kramrisch makes a case for its superiority, based on its being the material of choice for the Vedic

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[32] Ellen Raven, ‘Brick Terraces at Ahicchatra and Mansar: A Comparison’ (Groningen: Library of the University of Groningen, 2008), pp. 1-48 (p. 1). <http://mansar.eldoc.ub.rug.nl/>

[33] James Fergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (1876), 5th edn (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1998), p. 4.

[34] Ibid., p. 52.

altar.[35] She notes that: 'by its symbolic significance the brick has precedence over stone and wood. Stone is used as its substitute.'[36] The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (6.1.2) describes the relationship between the Vedic creator god Prajāpati (Lord of Creatures), and the sacrificial brick. The passage relates how after creating the entire universe, the vital air left Prajāpati, and he asked Agni – god of the sacrificial fire – to restore him. During this process, the oblations that were offered to the fire by the gods became baked bricks**.**[37] Moreover, bricks have a further significance in that they are formed from the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water; sometimes a fifth element – ether – is also mentioned.[38]

An insight into how brick architecture may have been perceived in early India is provided by Bāṇabhaṭṭa, a seventh century Sanskrit writer employed at the court of King Harṣavardhana (*c*. 590-647 CE), who magnanimously wrote in his novel *Kādambarī*, that:

> Architecture in stone and in baked clay enjoyed equal rank … and the production of clay on a mass scale beautified all the distant quarters of space.[39]

As previously mentioned, only one standing brick temple survives from the Gupta period. However, several brick temple foundations of the epoch have been unearthed. For example, the ruins of three fifth century brick temples are situated at Bhitarī, an ancient fortified town located between Vārāṇasī and Ghāzipur in Uttar Pradesh.[40] The main temple was built from brick with some stone architectural elements, and was situated on a large-scale plinth constructed in a cellular arrangement composed of brick boxes filled with clay, rendering the platform solid but also cost effective.[41] The temple had an ambulatory path and a pillared *maṇḍapa*. In contrast to most Gupta temples with surviving donatary inscriptions, the main temple at Bhitarī was patronised by a Gupta ruler – Skandagupta – in order to increase the merit of his late

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[35] Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple I* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991, 1st edn 1946), p. 102.
[36] Ibid., p. 108.
[37] 6.1.2.22 in *Satapatha-Brāhmana According to the Text of the Mādhyandina School: Part III,* trans. by Julius Eggeling (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), p. 153.
[38] A.A. Ślączka, *Temple Consecration Rituals in Ancient India. Text and Archaeology* (published doctoral thesis, Leiden University, 2006), p. 187. <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/4581/ >
[39] J.E. Dawson 'Gupta Terracotta Art: An Overview', in *The Golden Age of Classical India*, ed. by Amina Okada and Thierry Zephir (Paris: rmn, 2007), pp. 85-91 (p. 86).
[40] Vidula Jayaswal, *Royal Temples of Gupta Period – Excavations at Bhitari* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2001), p. vii.
[41] Ibid., pp. 1-2.

father Kumāragupta (Figs. 2.36 and 2.37).[42] A pillar inscription records that Skandagupta installed an image of Vāsudeva in the shrine; this image may have been named Kumārasvāmin, who, as Bakker states, was 'a great archer and as such reflects the qualities of the emperor and his father.'[43] Temple 2 at Bhitarī is earlier, and on plan resembles the stone Kaṅkālī Devī temple at Tigowā.[44]

2.36. Brick foundations at Site 3, Bhitarī. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

Jayaswal suggests that Temple 1 might have been similar to Bhītargāon with its *triratha* plan, but with stone ornamentation stylistically close to that adorning the Pārvatī temple at Nāchnā-Kuṭhārā.[45] Only 20 kilometres from Ghāzipur is a second brick temple site known as Lathiya, which was active during the Gupta period. The foundations of four identical brick shrines have been unearthed, consisting of a sanctum and small *maṇḍapa*. The temples are in alignment and face east.

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[42] Ibid., p. vii.

[43] Hans Bakker, 'Commemorating the Dead: A Note on Skandagupta's Bhitarī Inscription, vss. 8-12', in *Revealing the Past: Recent Trends in Art and Archaeology: Prof. Ajay Mitra Shastri Commemoration Volume*, Vol. 2, ed. by R.K. Sharma and Devendra Handra (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2005), pp. 248-251 (p. 250).

[44] Jayaswal, p. 2.

[45] Ibid., p. 2.

2.37. South wall of temple 1 at Bhitarī. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

The foundations of a Gupta period brick Vaiṣṇava temple were found at Baigrām in the Dinajpur District of Bangladesh. The temple consists of a shrine facing west and enclosed by a *pradakṣiṇa-patha* (a circumambulatory pathway). At a later date a *maṇḍapa* was constructed in front of the shrine. A copperplate inscription was found here dating to 448 CE. It records that land was donated for the maintenance and repairs of the Govindasvāmī temple.[46]

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[46] Deva, pp. 24-25.

Khanderia

A few years back, an amateur archaeologist, Om Prakash Sharma, discovered the foundations of a Śiva temple near the small village of Khanderia, 35 kilometres south west of Bundi, Rajasthan. The coordinates for the site are 25° 17' 53.14" N 75° 24' 22.55 E. Sharma informed the *Archaeological Survey of India* (ASI) of his find and the site was visited in January 2012 by an ASI representative who dated it to the early Gupta period. Newspapers published the find but no scholarly report has yet been written.[47]

At the time of its construction, the Śiva temple at Khanderia was located within the kingdom of the Mālavas in Western Mālwa (Southeast Rajasthan). During the reign of Samudragupta, Western Mālwa became a vassal of the Gupta Empire.[48] The Mālavas paid taxes to their overlords but at the same time maintained some semblance of freedom. A small number of Gupta period temple sites have been found within Western Mālwa: at Darrā, Tonk and Maṇḍasor. By contrast, there is a proliferation of Gupta sites in Eastern Mālwa, such as at Udayagiri, Sāñcī and Eraṇ. The purpose of this subchapter is to introduce the ruined temple at Khanderia, and hopefully contribute to the study of Gupta temples in Western Mālwa.

Much of the landscape around Khanderia is dry, rocky and sparsely forested. A fertile, narrow gorge cuts across the terrain, running for approximately 9.8 kilometres. The temple is situated on a plateau, within walking distance of the Bhimlat Gorge (Fig. 2.38) which, even in the dry season, is cool and well-shaded with dense forest, fresh water springs, plenty of fish and lush vegetation. Sharma had found early shell inscriptions in caves on the cliff faces but at the time had not shown them to the ASI. The gorge is also home to numerous prehistoric rock paintings proving that there has been habitation here, perhaps intermittently, since early times. Directly to the east of the temple is a stream which was dry at the time of visiting. To the north is a large river. Sizeable modern dams have been constructed at either end of the gorge.

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[47] Mohammed Iqbal, 'Grocer-Archaeologist Discovers Gupta-Era Temple Near Bundi', in *The Hindu*, 13 January 2012. <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/grocerarchaeologist-discovers-guptaera-temple-near-bundi/article2797225.ece>

[48] Fleet, 'Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings', p.14.

2.38. Bhimlat gorge.

White sandstone threaded with colour is plentiful on the plateau and there are signs of quarrying to the east of the temple (Fig. 2.39). The sandstone used for an *ekamukhaliṅga* lying at the site matches – in appearance, at least – that from the quarried area. A railway track was constructed a few metres away from the north side of the temple in the late 1980s but it is not clear whether this caused further damage to the site, although, given the proximity, it is likely to have had an adverse effect on it. There is a small village nearby but otherwise the area is isolated.

The square temple foundations are hidden from view by a little grove of trees and sit atop a mound strewn with baked bricks and the occasional stone fragment (Fig. 2.40). Given the relatively large scale of the temple, it is probable that there was a covered processional pathway (*pradakṣiṇa-patha*) with an enclosed *garbhagṛha*. A similar layout is found, for example, at the Pārvatī temple at Nāchnā.[49]

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[49] Deva, pp. 38-40.

2.39. Signs of stone quarrying. The temple mound is in the background.

2.40. The mound littered with bricks and stone sculptural and architectural fragments.

The Khanderia temple is raised on a tall *jagatī,* which may be tiered; but since most of it is buried beneath the earth it is not possible to establish this at present. Both Sharma and the villagers say that a few years ago the foundations were in better shape and that there were three steps leading up to the temple. Now a displaced stone step, broken at one end, lies inside of the entrance. The villagers informed us that people regularly remove sacred baked bricks from the mound with spiral, or semi-circular, and vertical grooves on them, said to be permeated with the presence of divinity (Figs. 2.41 and 2.42). Bricks incised with grooves and dots made using the fingers were also found at the Pawāyā temple.[50]

2.41. A baked brick with circular grooves said to be sacred.

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[50] D. R. Patil, *Quinquennial Administration Report of the Archaeological Government of Gwalior State for the Samvats 1998-2002 (Years 1942-46)* (Gwalior: Alijah Darbar Press, 1949), Plate VIII.

2.42. Local women showing us the bricks.

The temple measures approximately 5.5 m square internally and its brick walls are standing at a height of, on average, 56 cm, though in some places it is much lower (Figs. 2.43, 2.44, and 2.45). It is probable that stone was used for the major structural and decorative features of the temple, while the platform and walls were constructed from brick. The average brick size at the site is between 6.5 cm and 7 cm in height, narrower than those used for other Gupta brick temples. The average brick size at Bhītargāon, Pāwāya and Ahichhatrā, for instance, is between 7.5 cm and 8 cm. Further temple fragments may be buried in the mound at Khanderia, but there is also evidence to suggest that parts of the temple were relocated and recycled for different purposes. A substantial doorjamb fragment (Figs. 2.46 and 2.47), identical to a piece lying adjacent to the entrance of the temple, has been found approximately five kilometres away at a *satī* (self-immolation) memorial site beside the road leading to Bundi. On the reverse of the fragment, is a carving (Fig. 2.47b) dating to between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.[51] It depicts a woman standing beside a warrior on a horse wielding a sword and shield. The stone is commemorating both the man and his wife, the latter whom committed *satī* after her husband died in battle. A few such

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[51] Michael Willis suggested these approximate dates for the *satī* memorial marker.

memorial stones stand beside this one, but they do not appear to have been taken from the Śiva temple. This find indicates that the temple must have lain in a ruinous state for several centuries.

2.43. A wall of the sanctum.

2.44. The inner sanctum of the ruined temple.

2.45. A wall of the sanctum at Khanderia.

Until five years ago the *ekamukhaliṅga* (Figs. 2.48a and 2.48b) at Khanderia is said to have been in pristine condition, standing upright in the centre of a square *yoni*. Following the general practice, the lower portion of the *liṅga* was buried in the earth. Its condition was remarkable considering that it might have been exposed to the elements for several centuries. The site does not have a protected status and villagers tell of a tragic incident when vandals came and smashed the *liṅga* and *yoni* in half while searching for treasures. Despite its fractured state, the beauty and sophistication of the life-sized *ekamukhaliṅga* is still very much in evidence. The face of Śiva emerging from the *liṅga* is carved in relief and reflects the early Gupta ideals of physical perfection. The shape of Śiva's face is soft and moon-like with a small chin emphasised below the mouth. The lips are full, with a bee-stung appearance. The surviving eye is large, almond-shaped and delicately outlined. The ear lobes are long and adorned with jewel-studded hooped earrings. A fold of skin is visible on the neck. A single, elaborate necklace following the line of the jaw completes the decoration. Matted locks (*jaṭās*) fall down behind Śiva's ears in a typical fashion. Only a few delicate strands of hair on the crown of his head have survived, but Sharma remembers the lost topknot as being particularly beautiful**.**

2.46. Stone fragment at Khanderia probably belonging to a doorjamb.

2.47. (a) Fragment of doorjamb from Khanderia found at satī memorial site about 5 km away; (b) Reverse of the doorjamb with a carving commemorating a fallen hero and his wife's satī.

2.48. (a) ekamukhaliṅga at Khanderia and (b) detail of ekamukhaliṅga.

Although the Khanderia *liṅga* is superior in artistry, it shares some general features with the *ekamukhaliṅga* located approximately 290 km away to the southeast, in Cave 4 at Udayagiri (400-425 CE) (Fig. 2.49). Furthermore, the design on a doorjamb belonging to Khanderia has some similarities with carvings around the entrance to the Udayagiri cave. The two temples can be ascribed to a roughly contemporaneous date, then, and belong to the reign of either Candragupta II or his son Kumāragupta.

2.49. *Ekamukhaliṅga Cave 4 at Udayagiri.*

The doorjamb is carved with a climbing-vine motif (Figs. 2.46 and 2.47a). Magnificent tulips stem from the vine at regular intervals. Smaller flowers with ornate scroll-like petals fill the intervening spaces. Bordering the panel is a band of identical flowers. This is a variation on a theme that is found on many Gupta period doorjambs. Although it is a good example of early fifth century craftsmanship, it does not have the finesse, confidence, or complexity found on later Gupta doorjambs such as those at Deogaṛh or Bhūmarā.

Other notable finds include a damaged stone Nandi (bull) (Fig. 2.50), the vehicle of Śiva, with a very pronounced hump, situated at the base of the mound and still partially buried in the earth. Upright in front of the temple is a large stone slab that might originate from the wall of the shrine, with shafts of pilasters on either side.[52] A carved flower, now much eroded, is visible at the base of each pilaster. Lastly, a tall, square pillar of stone, fragmented, stands beside the entrance to the temple. This may be the shaft of a pillar, or alternatively, a fallen beam.

2.50. Stone Nandi still partially buried on the mound at Khanderia.

Damage inflicted on this temple has evidently accelerated in recent years, possibly due to the construction of the railway track. Sharma keeps the whereabouts of the site

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[52] Adam Hardy offered this suggestion for the purpose of the stone slab.

a closely guarded secret and consequently tourism has not yet become a major cause for concern. At present, it is not clear what fate awaits this site. The temple ruins and the impressive *ekamukhaliṅga* may simply be left to deteriorate further. Alternatively, the site might receive attention from archaeologists and historians. Ultimately, it must be hoped that the Khanderia temple, however fragmentary, will receive protected status.

Bhītargāon

Introduction

The temple at Bhītargāon is located in the Kanpur District of Uttar Pradesh, five kilometres from the river Rind (coordinates: 26°12’43” N 80°16’28” E) (Fig. 2.51). It is the only standing brick temple surviving from the Gupta period, and as such is an invaluable point of reference for the brick structures at Ahichhatrā, Pawāyā and elsewhere. The formal qualities, iconography and archaeological history of the monument will be explored in detail in this subchapter.

Literature Review

The temple was surveyed by Alexander Cunningham in 1877 and again in 1878. His report is of immense importance as the temple was to deteriorate rapidly in the years that followed. A number of excellent photographs taken in 1878 by Cunningham’s assistant, Joseph Beglar, are held in the British Library and show the temple before it underwent any major conservation work and before it lost its porch in 1895.[53] One image in particular shows the precarious state of the temple before it was repaired, with the entire weight of the monument balancing on a much-diminished base – possibly the result of brick theft (Fig. 2.52). If Cunningham had not commenced repairs when he did, the temple might have collapsed.

J. Ph. Vogel visited Bhītargāon in 1907, followed by A. H. Longhurst in 1909. Vogel produced a report on the temple, which included notes, drawings and

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[53] J. Ph. Vogel, ‘The Temple of Bhītargāon’, in *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1908-9* (Calcutta: Archaeological Survey of India, 1912), pp. 5-21 (p. 11).

photographs sent to him by Longhurst. The report covers the changes to the structure since Cunningham first surveyed the temple, as well as renovation work carried out. Mohammad Zaheer surveyed the temple in 1977, and in 1981 published *The Temple of Bhītargāon*, which includes a number of useful comparative studies of subjects too often overlooked; for instance, Zaheer compares the decorative bricks from the temple with similar types found at other Gupta period sites. Krishna Deva's entry on Bhītargāon, or Bhītargāñv as he calls it, in the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture* (1988), focuses on both the plan and the formal qualities of the architecture. His description is thorough though he does not appear to have referred to the original photographs. Most recently, IIT Kanpur carried out laser scans of the monument.[54] Overall, these reports, drawings, photographs and scans enable us to chart the excavation, conservation history and evolution of the temple.

2.51. West face of the Bhītargāon temple.

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[54] Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, 'Terrestrial Laser Scanning of the Brick Temple at Bhitargaon, Kanpur', <http://home.iitk.ac.in/~blohani/TLS_Arch/Bhitar_ppt.pdf>, pp. 1-12

2.52. Photograph taken of the Bhītargāon temple from the southwest by Joseph Beglar in 1878. Courtesy of the British Library.

Discovery of the Temple at Bhītargāon and Intervention

Cunningham was notified of the temple by Rāja Siva Prasād and subsequently visited Bhītargāon in November 1877 and again in February 1878.[55] He repaired the

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[55] Alexander Cunningham, *Report of Tours in the Gangetic Provinces from Badaon to Bihar in 1875-76 and 1877-78* (Calcutta: Archaeological Survey of India, 1880), p. 40.

lower part of the structure using decorative bricks and mouldings of the same style and dimensions, retrieved from the ruins of a contemporaneous temple known locally as Jhījhī Nāg, located 500 feet (152 m) to the south.[56]

2.53. Photograph of the south face of the Bhītargāon temple.[57]

Vogel visited the temple in 1907 and was informed of the following by Superintendent Engineer, A.C. Polwhele:

> In 1884-5 it was proposed to repair the temple with plain brickwork of large bricks similar to those used in its construction and to rebuild certain fallen portions in the same manner so as to prevent further falling away. This was

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[56] Ibid., p. 40.
[57] In Vats, Plate XXXII.

> estimated to cost Rs. 1,945. Subsequently it was decided merely to rebuild such portions of the plinth as had crumbled away and the face of the porch to prevent the overhanging superstructure from falling over. The cost was estimated at Rs. 550. It appears from the records, however, that the matter was shelved at the time for want of the trifling sum necessary to carry out the repairs and was eventually dropped, so that nothing was actually done.[58]

In 1905 a sub-overseer independently decided to have the temple repaired. Vogel found the building coated in thick white plaster up to the level of the *kapota* (cornice moulding) (Fig. 2.53).[59] He describes this as 'a painful contrast with the subdued antiquity of the decayed brickwork.'[60] Subsequently, in 1909, Vogel sent Longhurst to Bhītargāon to conduct a detailed survey report and to carry out repairs. The latter describes the temple as being:

> In a very dilapidated condition, the whole of the upper portion of the spire down to the ornamental brick cornice being far too decayed to justify any attempt at repairs beyond closing up the well-like opening in the summit of the room from the outside with new brickwork, making this portion of the room watertight.[61]

Longhurst informs us that he also had the plinth and the circular brick archway above the entrance repaired.[62] In actuality, based on his drawings, and on photographs of the structure prior to his visit, it seems that he had the entire plinth rebuilt in a more sympathetic fashion. Thus, the white plaster coating must have also been removed under Longhurst's instructions. The temple has continued to be maintained and restored with new bricks, but aside from a modern flight of stairs leading up to its entrance, the original design of the temple does not appear to have been overly tampered with since Longhurst's visit.

Jagatī

The temple is positioned on a substantial square plinth (*jagatī*) discovered during excavations carried out by Longhurst in 1909 and now buried beneath ground level.[63]

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[58] Vogel, pp. 11-12.

[59] Ibid., p. 12.

[60] Ibid., p. 13.

[61] A. H. Longhurst in J. Ph. Vogel, 'The Temple of Bhītargāon', in *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1908-9* (Calcutta: Archaeological Survey of India, 1912), pp. 5-21 (p. 13).

[62] Ibid., p. 14.

[63] Mohammad Zaheer, *The Temple of Bhītargāon* (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1981), p. 15.

The plinth was formed from brick cells;[64] the same method used to build the platforms on brick monuments such as those at Ahichhatrā, Pawāyā and Bhitarī, and at the later brick temple at Sirpur.[65] The strength of this platform may account in part for the longevity of the temple, although its survival probably owes much to its fortuitous location. Cunningham writes:

> It seems strange how the Bhitargaon temple with its numerous terra-cotta sculptures could have escaped the iconoclastic fury of the Muhammadan conquerors. Perhaps its escape may be solely due to its lucky position. During the great idol-breaking period, when Cawnpore [Kanpur] was unknown, and Lucknow was a mere country town, the main lines of road passed by Bhitargaon on all sides at many miles distance.[66]

Moreover, when Vogel visited the temple in 1907, he reported that the village was still only reachable by bullock cart.[67]

Plan

The temple is built on a square plan with double recessed corners (*triratha*) and stands at a height of a little over 15 m (Fig. 2.54). Including the no-longer extant porch, the structure was 14.8 m in length and 11 m in width, with walls 2.4 m thick.[68] The temple is constructed from burnt bricks and mud mortar.[69]

Both Cunningham's elevation drawing and floor plan show a covered portico with a flight of steps on the east side of the temple leading through into an *ardhamaṇḍapa* (hall), after which there is another passage leading through to the *garbhagṛha* (Fig. 2.55). Both of the passages are 'roofed with semi-circular vaults, and the two rooms with pointed domes.'[70] These drawings are rather deceptive, as Cunningham admits in his report that the entrance passage was not actually extant when he visited and Beglar's photograph of the projecting vestibule confirms this (Fig. 2.56).[71] The drawings are a theoretical reconstruction insofar as the entrance passage is concerned. Beglar's photograph does show that, in all likelihood, the entrance to the temple had a

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[64] Longhurst in Vogel, p. 14.
[65] Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple I*, p. 148.
[66] Cunningham, *Report of Tours*, p. 46.
[67] Vogel, p. 8.
[68] Cunningham, *Report of Tours*, p. 40.
[69] Ibid., pp. 40-41.
[70] Ibid., p. 41.
[71] Ibid., p. 41.

semi-circular ceiling, rather than a vaulted one, as the bricks sit horizontally instead of being placed vertically, as they are in the *ardhamaṇḍapa*. The floor plan drawn up in 1909 depicts some of the foundation walls, the porch or *ardhamaṇḍapa*, the passage and sanctum. The elevation, on the other hand, shows that most of the *ardhamaṇḍapa* had already collapsed by this point. Both Zaheer's plan (1977) and a recent laser scan illustrate the temple as it is now, with only the passage into the sanctum, and the sanctum itself intact, but with a small portion of the walls of the lost porch standing, serving to enlarge the entrance to the temple (Fig. 2.57). Above the *garbhagṛha* was a second chamber apparently having a square plan and vaulted ceiling.[72] Recent laser scans suggest that this chamber has since been filled with bricks, perhaps to strengthen the *śikhara*.

2.54. Bhītargāon temple from the northwest.

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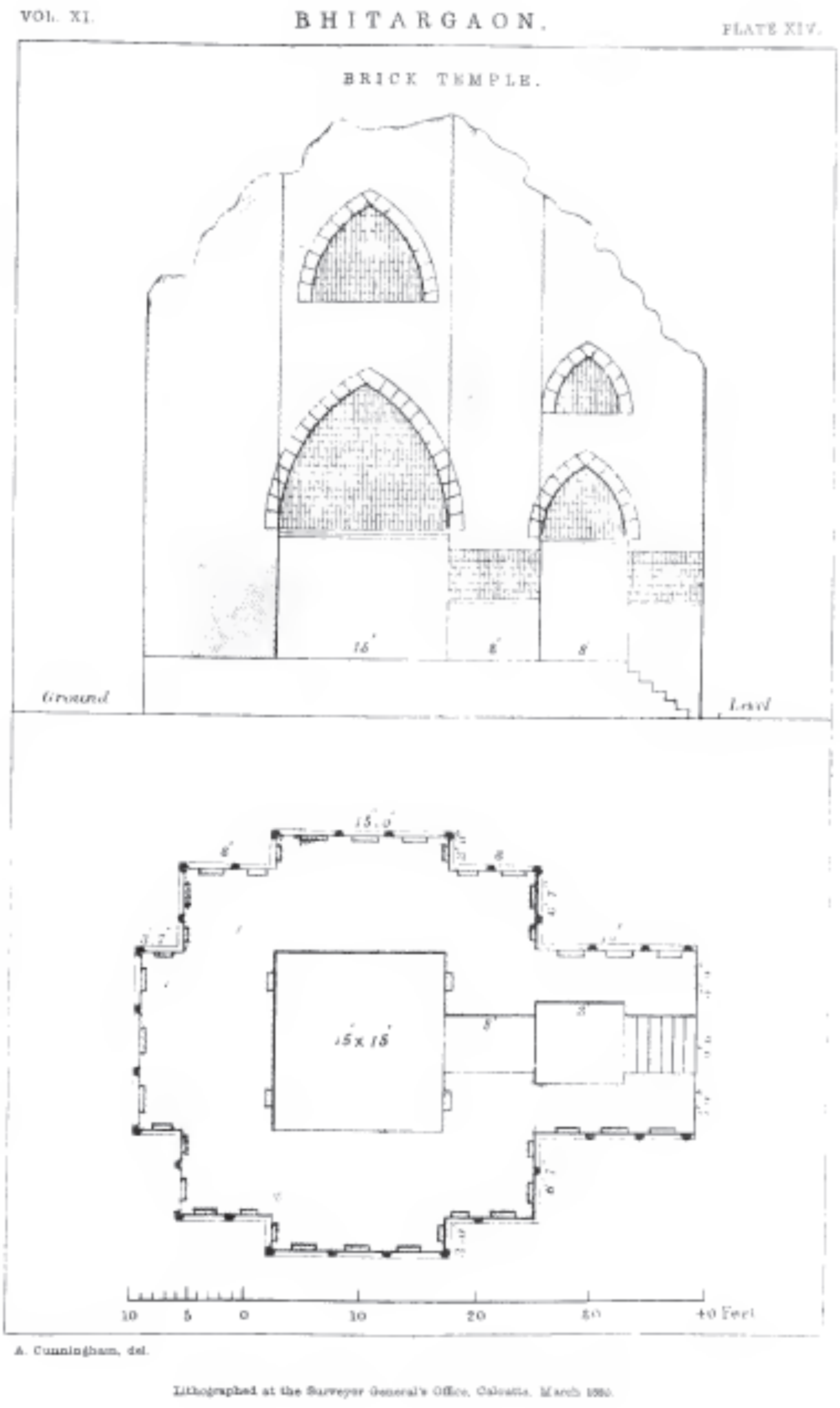
[72] Ibid., p. 41.



2.55. Alexander Cunningham's floor plan and cross section of the Bhītargāon temple.[73]

Arches

The vaulted and semi-circular ceilings inside the temple are often called true arches,[74] but Zaheer disputes this. He points out that the bricks are not in the shape of

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[73] Ibid., Plate XIV.

voussoirs (wedge-shaped), nor is there a keystone to strengthen the structure. As such, the width of the exterior curve of the arch (extrados) is greater than that of the inner curve of the arch (intrados). Zaheer concludes that, ‘the arches at Bhītargāon were, therefore, not true arches and were bound to collapse under stress.’[75] On the other hand, Adam Hardy has pointed out that these are true arches, and that voussoirs are not absolutely necessary since the mud mortar would fill in any gaps.[76]

2.56. Photograph taken by Joseph Beglar in 1878 of the east face of the Bhītargāon temple with the ruins of the no-longer extant porch intact. Courtesy of the British Library.

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[74] Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century* (New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2008), p. 528.

[75] Zaheer, p. 22.

[76] Adam Hardy, Personal Communication.

To complicate matters, Cunningham writes that the bricks *were* in the shape of voussoirs.[77] So, either the voussoirs were replaced with regular bricks during restoration, or Cunningham was mistaken, though this is unlikely.[78] The Gupta period *stūpa* at Mīrpur Khās in Sind, Pakistan, also had true arches.[79] Moreover, Cunningham describes this type of arch as having been found on a ruined temple on top of which stands the *stūpa* of Nongarh.[80] Sadly, little survives of the latter structure owing to continuous brick theft.[81]

2.57. The Bhītargāon temple from the northeast.

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[77] Cunningham, *Report of Tours*, p. 143.

[78] Zaheer mentions that the semi-circular ceiling was restored with modern bricks (see Zaheer, p. 20).

[79] M. C. Joshi, 'The Gupta Art: An Introduction', in *The Golden Age of Classical India, The Gupta Empire* ed. by Amina Okada and Thierry Zephir (Paris: rmn, 2007), p. 33.

[80] Cunningham, *Report of the Tours*, p.143, L.S.S. O'Malley also describes the temple found at Nongarh and states that it proves true arches were used very early on in India. L. S. S. O'Malley, *Bihar and Orissa District Gazetteers*, (New Delhi: Logos Press, 2007, 1st edn 1926), p. 251.

[81] Dilip. K. Chakrabarti, *Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain: Lower and Middle Ganga* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), p.173.

Longhurst argues that stone lintels once strengthened the arches inside and outside the sanctum entrance, and that 'the large cavities just above the doorway on both sides prove the fact conclusively.'[82] Zaheer dismisses this theory on the grounds that a stone lintel would not sit well with an arched ceiling. Moreover he argues that Longhurst was jumping to conclusions when he reasoned that the lintels had been removed to the eighteenth century Jagannātha temple at Behtā, located three kilometres from Bhītargāon (Fig. 2.58).[83] The latter temple does indeed contain stone architectural elements dating to earlier periods, and several stone lintels and doorjamb fragments lie scattered in its courtyard; most of these pieces, however, belong to the medieval period, with one pillar being of Gupta origin. This does not mean, however, that there were no stone lintels at Bhītargāon, since it is not unusual for brick temples to have some stone elements, especially around doorways.

2.58. Jagannātha temple at Behtā.

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[82] Longhurst in Vogel, p. 14.
[83] Zaheer, p. 20.

Garbhagṛha

The *garbhagṛha* measures 4.5 m by 5.4 m and has a vaulted dome. Cunningham describes the floor of the *garbhagṛha* as being of bare earth, 'the whole of the floor having been dug up.'[84] The floor is now paved with bricks. Aside from four small niches in the walls, the interior is stark.

Vedībandha

The base of the temple consists of a tall *bhiṭṭa* (plinth), above which sits a *vedībandha* (moulded base) with three parts: a *kumbha* (water pot moulding), an *antarapaṭṭa* (broad recess), and a *kapota* (cornice).[85] The base does not have quite the same elegance or beauty of form as the *vedībandhas* of most Gupta period stone temples, but, as mentioned above, the base of the temple was in a very poor state when Cunningham first visited with only internal bricks showing, thus the reconstruction is unlikely to be true to the original design. Longhurst's measured drawings of 1909 show the reconstructed parts of the base pencilled in with a dotted line.

Jaṅghā

The *jaṅghā* (wall proper) begins above the *kapota*. It consists of a continuous row of pilasters each 1.2 m in height, interspersed with large rectangular niches (Fig. 2.59). The pilasters consist of the following parts (from top to bottom): A capital with an *uttara* (beam), *potikā* (bracket), bracket, *ghaṭa* (cushion) and neck; a shaft consisting of a semi-circular brick, two semi-hexagonal bricks and three plain rectangular bricks; and lastly, a pedestal with a rim, a *kumbha* and a *kumbha* foot. The capitals and *kumbhas* are composed of decorative moulded bricks, with small variations between each pilaster, especially between the *ghaṭas*, while the shafts are plain.

The niches hold terracotta panels depicting gods and goddesses from the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava pantheons, many of which are lost, damaged, or in museum collections. Fragmented terracotta plaques depicting the river goddesses, Gangā and Yamunā are

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[84] Cunningham, *Report of Tours*, p. 41.
[85] Deva, p. 37.

situated on either side of the entrance on the east face of the temple (Fig. 2.60). The sanctum was found virtually empty,[86] giving no indication of the main deity worshipped here.

Of the remaining plaques situated between the pilasters on the south side of the temple we find a depiction of *Gajāsuravadha* (Śiva killing the elephant asura), a standing Gaṇeśa, Śiva and Pārvatī seated on Mount Kailāsa, and an unidentified figure. Of the surviving plaques on the west face we find a depiction of Varāha, and of Viṣṇu. On the north side there are four surviving plaques depicting Lakṣmī, *Madhukaiṭabhavadha*, *Śumbhaniśumbhavadha*, and Nārāyaṇa, or Kṛṣṇa-Balarāma.[87]

2.59. Photograph capturing part of the south face of the Bhītargāon temple taken by Joseph Beglar in 1878. Courtesy of the British Library.

Running level with the *uttara* or 'beam' of each pilaster is a frieze bearing an inverted pyramidal design. Above this are two *karṇa* (ear) mouldings, also with common motifs, namely a band of lotus petals and a frieze depicting a pyramidal

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[86] Cunningham, *Report of Tours*, p. 41.
[87] J. C. Harle, *Gupta Sculpture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 55-56.

motif in high relief. Another *kapota* sits above this. Hardy describes this architectural feature as representing 'a canopy roof, with overhanging thatched eaves.'[88] In its current state the *kapota* is plain; however, small dormer windows (*candraśālā*s) spaced at regular intervals along the cornice have been recorded in Beglar's photographs and in Longhurst's elevation drawings. Terracotta heads peek out of the *candraśālās*, an arrangement found on many temples including Cave 19 at Ajaṇṭā. Interestingly, the shape of the *candraśālās* varies between semi-circular, pointed arch, or circular – the latter much like a small *candraśālā* from Ahichhatrā housed at the State Museum in Allahabad, still attached to its brick. Even in Beglar's photographs we can see that many of these *candraśālās* had already fallen away, leaving gaping holes behind them. Incidentally, Cunningham notes in his report that during each monsoon season the mud mortar became loose resulting in bricks falling off the temple.[89]

2.60. Detail of the east wall of the Bhītargāon temple with a niche containing traces of a plaque depicting a river goddess.

Above the *kapota* is a *rūpakaṇṭha*[90] (figural frieze), composed of rectangular terracotta panels (many of which are now lost) depicting *makaras* (mythical sea creatures), other animals such as lions and elephants, scenes of combat, fluid

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[88] Adam Hardy, *Indian Temple Architecture: Form and Transformation: The Karṇāṭa Drāviḍa Tradition, 7th to 13th Centuries* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1995), p. 52.
[89] Cunningham, *Report of Tours*, p. 45.
[90] Deva, p. 36.

figurative compositions and vegetal designs. Each plaque is separated from the next by a narrow vertical panel, the majority of which have a chequered motif. Beglar's photographs, however, capture the variety of designs that once adorned these vertical panels, most of which appear to have been floral, vegetal or figurative, without a chequer in sight. Above the panels runs a frieze depicting an inverted pyramidal motif. A pair of *karṇa* mouldings, the lower with a scrolling vine motif, and the upper bearing a pyramidal moulding in high relief cap this. Above this is a third *kapota*, which, like the one beneath it, was once adorned with small *candraśālās* housing terracotta heads. The superstructure, or *śikhara* (tower) begins above the *kapota*.

Śikhara

The ruined *śikhara* is of the *phāṃsanā* type, meaning that it has a rectilinear form, 'with [superimposed] arched hood-mouldings which are loosely *valabhī* (ie. they represent the arch over two half-arches characteristic of the barrel-roofed *valabhī* shrine form).'[91] Or, in other words, the arch hood mouldings resemble highly stylized *caitya* hall cross sections.[92] Underneath each of the arched hood mouldings is a niche, each of which represents a window through which we witness a scene unfolding; for example, a *mithuna* (amorous) couple reposing together on a cushioned seat, a male figure in meditation, a garland-bearing *vidyādhara* (celestial being), or simply the head of a celestial.

Some of the terracotta reliefs depict mythological stories such as the temptation of the sages Nara and Nārāyaṇa (explored in Chapters 9 and 11); a vibrant composition of a seated four-armed Viṣṇu slaying the demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha, who lie sprawled backwards over his lap; a scene showing a female figure offering a pot (of food?) to an emaciated man – probably Sītā and the demon Rāvaṇa, and a number of scenes depicting Kṛṣṇa killing various demons. The vast majority of the niches are now empty. Beglar's photographs show that by 1878 many of the terracotta heads and figures were already lost. There are, however, some charming examples found in the latter's pictures which reveal an expressive and playful quality on the part of the artists responsible. Other noteworthy details include the animated heads in some of the smallest *candraśālās*, each looking in a different direction, as well as sporting a

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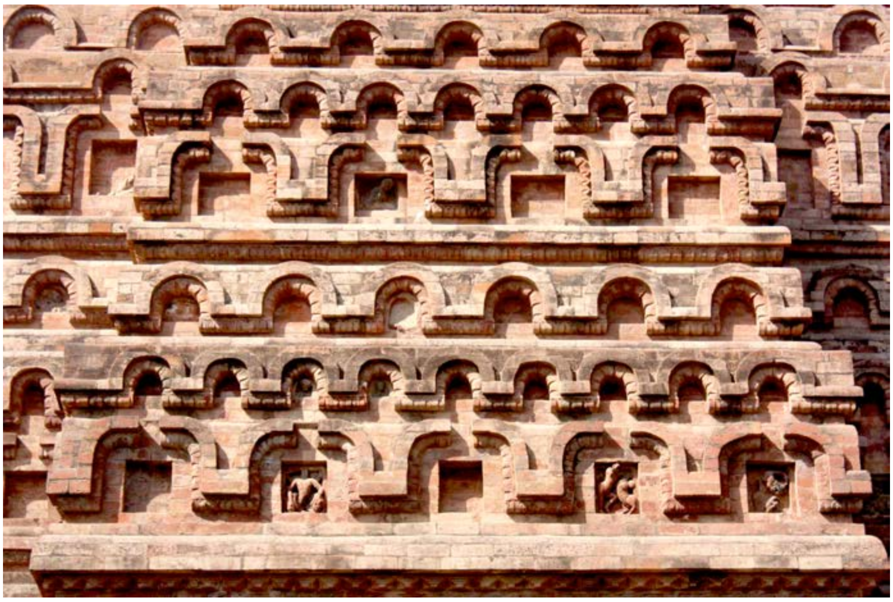
[91] Hardy, *The Temple Architecture of India*, p. 169.
[92] Adam Hardy, Personal Communication.

variety of hairstyles and expressions. This is in marked contrast to some stone or cave temples such as Cave 19 at Ajaṇṭā where all the heads are identical and face forwards. We can imagine that when carving into a monolithic piece of rock, experimentation would have been rather risky, a problem not shared by the medium of terracotta. The figures depicted in the panels at Bhītargāon are energetic, lively, muscular and bold – less delicate than those from Pawāyā, but as skillfully executed. The faces that survive are distinctive and characterful. Some of the themes depicted on the temple will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 8 and 9.

2.61. Photograph of the north face of the Bhītargāon temple taken by Joseph Beglar in 1878. Courtesy of the British Library.

Another particularly lovely architectural feature of this temple is the way that the dormer windows vary in size and shape as they move up the *śikhara* (Figs. 2.61 to 2.64). This layout is captivating and certainly adds an element of interest to the overall architectural plan. The manner in which the *candraśālās* have been organized is not arbitrary, however. As previously mentioned, they represent *valabhī* pavilions (an arch over two half arches) recalling the cross section of a *caitya* hall. The *kapota*, or roll cornice, marks the top of each storey. Above each complete *valabhī* pavilion is the upper half of a *valabhī*, or an arch, while the two half arches are 'buried', so to speak. As Hardy explains, this layout does not belong to the mainstream proto-*Nāgara* tradition where there would be an *āmalaka*-topped *kūṭa* on each corner, or in other words, an aedicule crowned with a finial. Moreover, on a proto-*Nāgara* temple we would have a single *valabhī* on each storey of the proto-*latā* ('creeper', or central spine of the temple).[93] At Bhītargāon rows of *valabhīs* adorn the first two storeys of the proto-*latā* on the *śikhara*, while the upper two storeys have a single *valabhī*.[94]



2.62. Detail of the śikhara of the Bhītargāon temple.

The top of the *śikhara* is too damaged, even in the early photographs, to reconstruct theoretically; nevertheless, there are three major possibilities worth noting here (Fig. 2.65). Firstly, the temple could have been topped by a single *āmalaka* crowning a *kūṭa* (square pavilion with, in this context, a *kapota* roof supporting the crowning *āmalaka*); secondly, it could have had a dome-like crown above a large *kūṭa* (also known as an *alpa vimāna*) as is common in South India; and lastly, it may have had a barrel-vaulted roof, albeit most probably with two ends – as opposed to being apsidal since it is situated over a square sanctum. In South India there are temples that have an apsidal barrel-vaulted roof over a square sanctum, but this is relatively rare and unlikely to apply to our temple. The first option is fairly improbable, as with this

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[93] Adam Hardy, Personal Communication.
[94] Ibid.

mode of temple architecture one would expect to find *āmalakas* crowning miniature *kūṭas* on each level (*bhūmi*). To the best of my knowledge, no *āmalakas* or *āmalaka* fragments have been found at Bhītargāon. The second type is associated more with South Indian architecture, although its prototypes are found in Buddhist reliefs as far north as Gandhāra. It is unlikely that an *alpa vimāna* would have crowned the Bhītargāon temple, however, as we would expect to find small *alpa vimānas* on the corners of the temple.[95] This leaves us with the third type, the barrel-vaulted roof. This would tie in well with the barrel-vault imagery throughout the *śikhara*. Moreover, a section of what could be an eave on one side of a barrel-vaulted roof is captured in one of Beglar's photographs. This is only a tentative suggestion since the upper part of the *śikhara* is too damaged, even in the early images, for us to be able to put forward anything more than an educated guess.

2.63. Detail of the śikhara of the Bhītargāon temple.

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[95] Ibid.

2.64. The north face of the Bhītargāon temple.

Early prototypes of the Bhītargāon temple survive in the form of relief carvings from the *stūpa* at Kanganhalli in Karnataka dating from around the first century BCE.[96] Here we find marvellous images of multi-storied shrines and *prāsādas* (palaces), which, although they belong to the South Indian (*Drāviḍa*) tradition of architecture, still embody some of the characteristics found in the later Gupta period brick temple. One of the multi-storied *prāsādas* depicted at Kanganhalli has a plinth

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[96] Michael Meister, 'Early Architecture and its Transformations: New Evidence for Vernacular Origins for the Indian Temple', in *The Temple in South Asia*, ed. by Adam Hardy (London: British Association of South Asian Studies, 2007), pp. 1-19 (p. 1).

over which sits a row of pillars; above this is a roof having the appearance of a *kapota* cornice. Atop this are two storeys, each with multiple dormer windows. The final storey has a single large dormer window and is crowned by a barrel-vaulted roof. The Bhītargāon temple appears to be an approximate and considerably more complex version of this proto-type.

Dating the Temple

Many scholars have situated the Bhītargāon temple in the early to mid-fifth century CE.[97] It might be suggested, however, that the Bhītargāon temple with its *bhadra* projections, upper shrine, ornamented *jaṅghā* (wall proper), and tall rectilinear *śikhara*, represents an advanced stage in the history of Gupta Hindu temple architecture. The structure might tentatively be dated to the late Gupta period, towards the close of the fifth century or in the early sixth century CE, possibly contemporaneous with the Daśāvatāra temple at Deogaṛh. S. K. Saraswati and Krishna Deva are also of this opinion, while M. C. Joshi dates the temple later, to between 590 and 620 CE, citing the Deogaṛh temple as a forerunner of the temple at Bhītargāon.[98] The terracotta relief sculptures, however, are Gupta in character and thus, Joshi's dating of the temple is improbable.

2.65. Detail of the heavily restored ruined śikhara of the Bhītargāon temple from the north.

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[97] See, for example, Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, Plate 107; and Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, p. 55.

[98] M. C. Joshi, 'The Śiva Temple at Nibiyakhera (Distt. Kanpur) and the Chronology of the Brick Temples in the Neighbourhood', *Bhārātī*, 8 (1964-65), pp. 65-75 (pp. 71-72).

The architectural form of the brick temple at Bhītargāon is relatively simple, but the moulded bricks and terracotta panels are refined and beautiful, and the overall effect is splendid. Later brick monuments such as the ninth century temple at Nibhyakedha (Fig. 6.82), located a few kilometres from Bhītargāon, have carved rather than moulded bricks and although the overall effect continues to dazzle, it is arguable that these later temples lack the exceptional artistry, subtle variation and refinement of ornamentation found on the only standing Gupta brick temple left to us.

Chapter 3: Monumental Terraced Brick Architecture

Introduction

This thesis is chiefly concerned with monumental brick architecture belonging to the little explored terraced genre. The Guptas or their subjects are often regarded as having erected – as Krishna Deva puts it – 'modest structures.'[1] A study of the terraced brick temple architecture of the period should, however, demonstrate that this perceived modesty was confined largely to the medium of stone only.

At present I am aware of almost forty stepped pyramidal structures built from brick or stone, although the actual number may exceed this, and more probably await excavation (Fig. 3.1). The known terraced monuments – compiled here for the first time – are the primary focus of this chapter (Table 3.1). The gathering together of these structures is of seminal importance in itself, but will moreover serve to demonstrate how widespread this form of architecture was, and more specifically, under which dynasties this type of architecture was most prevalent. In addition, an attempt will be made to understand the origins and development of monumental pyramidal architecture in the subcontinent and along parts of the Silk Road. This exercise will draw attention to the similarities as well as to the huge diversity within the genre. Ultimately, when these monuments are considered as a group they begin to challenge currently held views on the religious architecture of early North India, the study of which has in recent years been dominated by inquiries into the mainstream *Nāgara* mode of temple architecture.[2]

Although this thesis is chiefly concerned with architecture and sculpture dating to the Gupta and Vākāṭaka periods, it is important to include all of the known terraced structures dating up until the eleventh century CE, when this style dwindled, later to re-emerge in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Burma, Tibet and elsewhere. This allows for a greater

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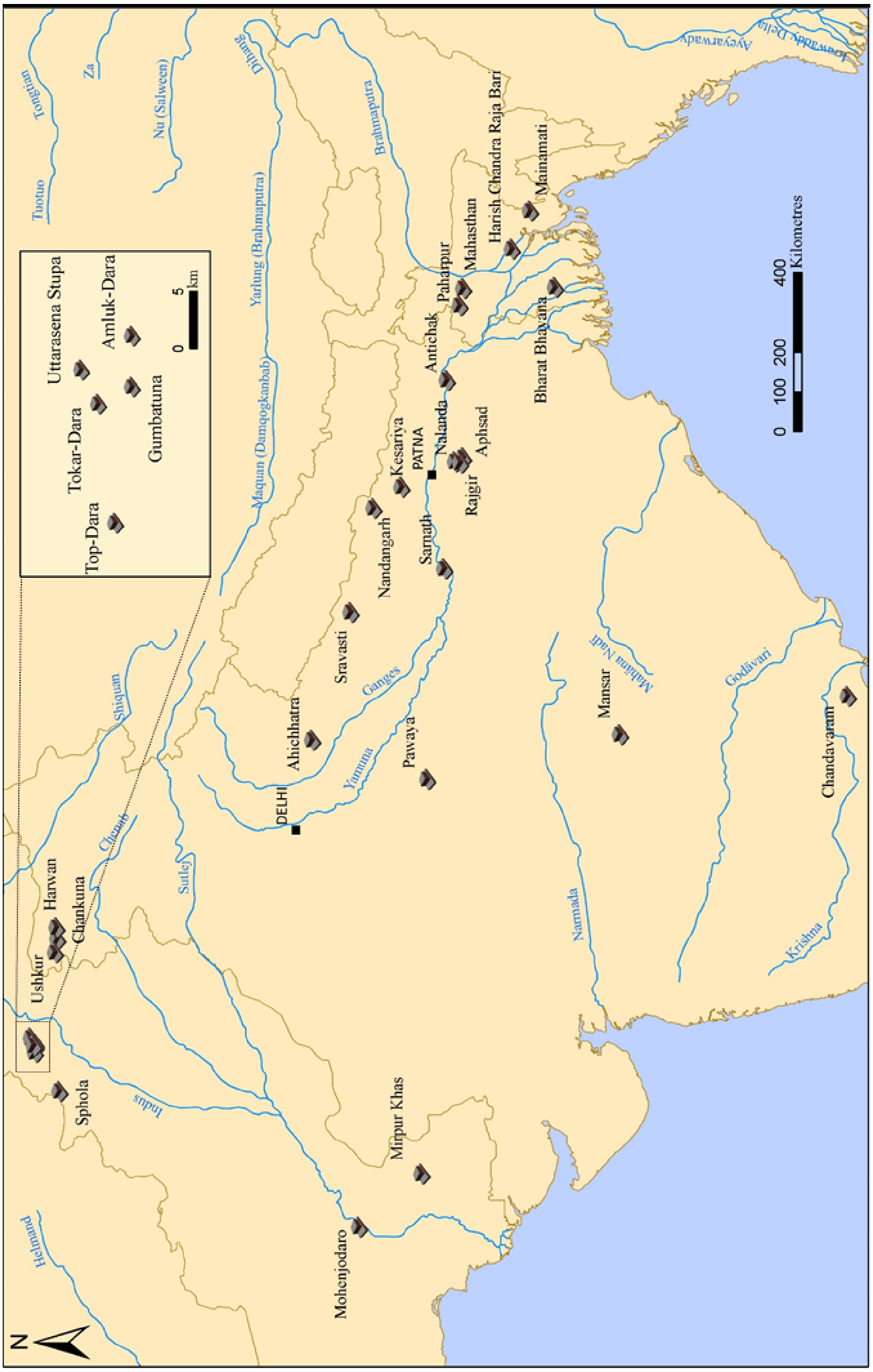
[1] Deva, p. 22.

[2] See for example: Hardy, *The Temple Architecture*; Michael Meister, 'Maṇḍala and Practice in Nāgara Architecture in North India', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 99 (1979), pp. 204-219; Michael Meister, 'Prāsāda as Palace'.

understanding of the evolution and spread of this genre of architecture, and informs us about the importance of the major trade routes in the building and sustaining of such large-scale monuments.



3.1. Map of the subcontinent showing location of terraced monuments.

To the best of my knowledge, the only studies published to date on the development and spread of the terraced mode of architecture, are Heinrich Gerhard Franz's 'Der Indische Terrassentempel' (1975) and 'Stūpa and Stūpa-Temple in the Gandhāran Regions and in Central Asia' (1980).[3] His essays provide an insightful overview of the subject, although terraced monuments of a Hindu affiliation are not included in his discourse. Several scholars, though, have focused their attention on one or more of the terraced monuments. Particularly useful for this research have been Hans Bakker's publications on the terraced monuments and iconography at Mansar (2007 and 2008);[4] Ellen Raven's comparison of ACII at Ahichhatrā and MNS III (also known as the Pravareśvara temple) at Mansar (2008);[5] and Joanna Williams' analysis of the Viṣṇu temple at Pawāyā (1982).[6] Krishna Deva also briefly discusses a handful of the Gupta period pyramidal monuments in the *Encyclopedia of Indian Temple Architecture* (1988).

The monuments under consideration here span approximately thirteen hundred years, from around the second century BCE to the eleventh century CE.[7] Monumental pyramidal architecture became popular during the Kuṣāṇa period, and indeed, terraced structures are found across the territory once constituting the Kuṣāṇa Empire. The impression gained from the distribution of surviving Kuṣāṇa monuments is that this style of architecture flourished especially in ancient Gandhāra (present day northern Pakistan and northeast Afghanistan), where many of the early Buddhist *stūpas* are constructed on multi-tiered bases, usually consisting of two or three platforms. Typically the base platform is square, or almost square, sometimes with circular upper platforms. Often the upper terraces are narrow and not always intended for circumambulation. As a result, the form of the terraced platforms tends to be steep

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[3] Heinrich Gerhard Franz, 'Der Indische Terrassentempel', in *Studies on Indian Temple Architecture*, ed. by Pramod Chandra (New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies, 1975), pp. 166-178; Heinrich Gerhard Franz, 'Stūpa and Stūpa-Temple in the Gandhāran Regions and in Central Asia', in *The Stūpa, its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance*, ed. by Anna Dallapiccola (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1980), pp. 39-58.

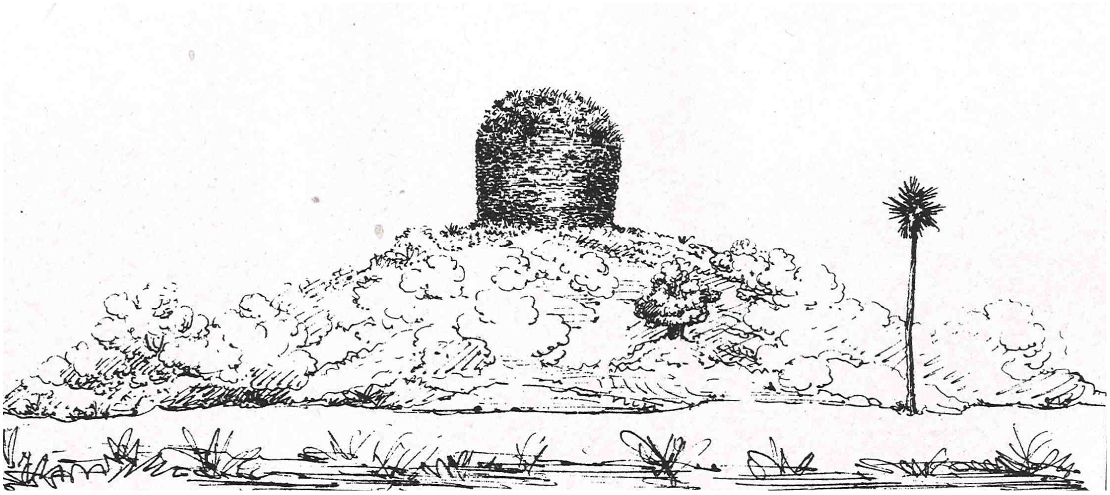
[4] Hans Bakker, 'Monuments to the Dead in Ancient North India', *Indo-Iran Journal*, 50 (2007), pp. 11-47; Hans Bakker, *Mansar: The Discovery of Pravaresvara and Pravarapura Temple and Residence of the Vākāṭaka King Pravarasena II* (Groningen: Library of the University of Groningen, 2008). <http://mansar.eldoc.ub.rug.nl/root4/Mansar/>;

[5] Raven, pp. 1-48.

[6] Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*.

[7] The earliest stage of construction on Site 1 at Mohenjodaro dates to the Late Mature Harappan period (See Giovanni Verardi and Federica Barba, 'The So-called Stupa at Mohenjo Daro and its Relationship with the Ancient Citadel', *Prāgdhārā*, 19 (2008-2009), pp. 147-170 (p. 167)). The receding terraces may be a later addition to the structure and the crowning *stūpa* dates to *circa* the Kuṣāṇa period.

and compact. As this style of architecture evolved, terraces widened allowing for ambulation and by the Gupta period platforms were generously proportioned, lending the structures a more pyramidal form.



3.2. Cunningham's drawing of the stūpa and mound at Kesariyā in the early 1860s.[8]

Several terraced monuments were constructed between the fourth and sixth centuries during the Gupta and Vākāṭaka periods, mostly in central and northeast India and in modern day Bangladesh. A number of pyramidal structures were erected during the seventh century in Bihar, and in Main.āmatī in Bangladesh, possibly under the Later Gupta rulers and the Khaḍga kings respectively. Under the Devas and Chandras in the eighth and ninth centuries, and the Pālas between the eighth and eleventh centuries, several substantial terraced monuments were constructed in the east of the subcontinent, many of them serving as *vihāras* or *mahāvihāras.* Numerous pyramidal structures were also considerably enlarged during this period. Most, if not all of the monuments listed in Table 3.1 underwent various phases of restoration, transformation, enlargement or even sometimes shifts in religious affiliation and use.

The common feature shared by these structures, which belong both to Hindu and Buddhist traditions, is a tall pyramidal base made up of a number of terraces. Originally, either a *stūpa* or a temple would have surmounted the terraces. The platforms were circular, square, rectangular, polygonal, or hexagonal and invariably solid, many having been constructed from a series of brick boxes filled with compacted debris formed from broken bricks and earth. None of the temples

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[8] Alexander Cunningham, *Four Reports Made During the Years 1862-63-64-65* (Simla: Archaeological Survey of India, 1871), Plate XXIV.

belonging to these monuments are extant, with the *stūpas* faring somewhat better. At least part of the dome is intact on many of the Kuṣāṇa period *stūpas* from Gandhāra. Stone has rendered these structures more durable than many of their brick counterparts in the Gangetic plains; nevertheless, a section of the brick *stūpa* at Kesariyā has survived, magnificently situated atop six terraces (Fig. 3.3). A sketch by Cunningham, and photographs from the 1930s show the *stūpa* dome almost intact (Figs. 3.2 and A26). Most surprising though, is the survival of the dome on the brick monument at Chandavaram, which dates in its last phase to *circa* the first or second century CE; the outer facing of the *stūpa*, though, is no longer intact.

3.3. The partially excavated stūpa of Kesariyā at dawn. Photograph courtesy of Peter Sharrock.

The Buddhist Roots of Pyramidal Architecture in South Asia

Of the terraced monuments that remain, the vast majority are Buddhist, and for this reason some scholars[9] have chosen to ignore the overwhelming Brahmanical evidence found at certain sites in favour of a Buddhist affiliation.[10] The terraced style was assimilated into Hindu architecture most probably around the late Kuṣāṇa or early

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[9] Shrimali proposes that ACI was originally a pre-Gupta Buddhist *stūpa* but this theory can be ruled out owing to the absence of Buddhist findings (See K. M. Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1983), pp. 49-50).

[10] Pre-excavation, the archaeological site of Mansar was purchased by a Buddhist organization (Bodhisatva Nagarjun Smarak Samstha Va Anusandhan Kendra), and despite the absence of any Buddhist finds during the excavation, giant images of Bodhisattvas have been erected along the wall around the site.

Gupta period. It was, however, a relatively short lived trend, since the last surviving Hindu terraced monument to be constructed is the seventh century Viṣṇu temple at Aphṣāḍ in Bihar, most probably built by Ādityasena, a ruler belonging to the lineage of the Later Guptas of Magadha (Fig. 3.4).

3.4. The ruins of the platforms of the Viṣṇu temple at Aphṣāḍ in Bihar. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

The demise of Hindu brick temples constructed on multi-storied bases coincides with the blossoming of temple architecture in stone. By the eighth century, a number of structural stone and rock-cut temples were being built on a monumental scale; the rock hewn monolithic Kailāsanātha temple at Ellorā (*c*. 750-800 CE), for example, measures 32 m in height (Fig. 3.5), and the Brihadisvara temple in Tanjore (1009 CE) has a tower measuring almost 60 m in height. Importantly too, the mainstream *Nāgara* and *Drāviḍa* styles of architecture in both stone and brick, now dominated the landscape. In light of these developments, it is possible that within the Hindu domain, terraced structures, though impressive, had become outmoded.

Ellen Raven argues against the perpetuated notion of a Buddhist prototype for Hindu terraced structures:

> It is frequently assumed that the terraced brick temples may have had its [sic] prototype in the Buddhist *stūpa* or at least ‘be closely connected’ to it (Agrawala 1981: 87). The most explicit defender of this theory was H. G. Franz, who traced the terraced platform directly to Gandhāra, and postulated a process of ‘Indianization’ of Gandhāran pilasters, beams and niches into fully Indian shapes

> (1975). But why assume that stepped platforms were a Buddhist prerogative before Hindus adopted such a building type?[11]

To demonstrate the separate trajectory Hindu pyramidal structures may have taken, Raven draws attention to the 10.3 m wide platform at Nagari in Rajasthan dating to *circa* the first century CE.[12] The platform, three courses high, was used for the worship of the then popular *bhagavatas*, Saṅkarṣaṇa and Vāsudeva.[13] It might be conjectured, however, that there is a giant leap between the use of a single platform (after all most temples and *stūpas* are elevated on a plinth), to the construction of a monumental stepped platform. In accordance with H. G. Franz, I believe that Hindu terraced temple architecture had its origins in stepped Buddhist architecture.

3.5. The Kailāsanātha temple at Ellorā. Photograph taken in 1895 by Deen Dayal. Courtesy of the British Library.

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[11] Raven, p. 2.
[12] Ibid., pp. 2-3.
[13] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

Tellingly, the majority of surviving pyramidal structures are found along the *Uttarāpatha*, sometimes known as the Grand Trunk Road,[14] the major trade route running through northern India. This route travels through Gandhāra, and onwards passing through centres such as Ahichhatrā, Śrāvastī, Vārāṇasī and Nālandā.[15] The *Uttarāpatha* would have enabled this mode of architecture to be disseminated far and wide. Of interest is a Kuṣāṇa period pillar from Sanghol in the Punjab, which bears a fascinating relief carving of a multi-tiered *stūpa*, demonstrating that there was a familiarity with this style of architecture in this region from an early date.[16] Incidentally, Sanghol is described by S. P. Gupta as the meeting place of the Gandhāran and Mathurā schools of art.[17] Other Kuṣāṇa period relief carvings depicting terraced *stūpa*s include a lintel carving from Mathurā portraying a multi-tiered structure flanked by two worshippers, and a similar carving depicted on the pedestal of a Buddha image from Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh.[18] In these three images the structure is tall, narrow and pillar-like, indeed more of a tower than a pyramid.

It is worth mentioning here a Gupta period lintel from Garhwa in Uttar Pradesh, an important archaeological site on the *Uttarāpatha*. Although no terraced monuments were found here, an interesting though worn image portrayed on the stone lintel depicts a triple-tiered structure – probably a temple – with a series of pillars situated along the uppermost platform. Figures (probably religious mendicants) are shown crouching at the base of the structure and on its platforms, being served food and drink (Fig. 3.6).

Although Gandhāra may have been the major influence behind the development of pyramidal architecture, we must not forget the early brick *stūpa* with a circular terraced base at Chandavaram in Andhra Pradesh, which was constructed *circa* the second century BCE and was expanded more than once during the first or second

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[14] Saifur Rahman Dar, ‘Pathways Between Gandhāra and North India’, in *On the Cusp of an Era: Art in the Pre-Kuṣāṇa World*, ed. by Doris Meth Srinivasan (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 24-54 (p. 33).

[15] See map in Dar, p. 35.

[16] S. P. Gupta, ‘Sanghol: The Meeting Place of Works of Art of Gandhāra and Mathurā’, in *Investigating Indian Art: Proceedings of a Symposium on the Development of Early Buddhist and Hindu Iconography, Held at the Museum of Indian Art, Berlin in May 1986*, ed. by Marianne Yaldiz and Wibke Yobo (Berlin: SMPK, 1987), pp. 89-104 (p. 94).

[17] As an aside, sculptures from Mathurā were found at Ahichhatrā (see Chapter one) as well as at least one black schist sculpture probably hailing from Gandhāra.

[18] Gupta, ‘Sanghol’, pp. 94-96.

centuries CE.[19] It is not known at present whether this type of architecture was once well represented in South India. As an aside, though, numerous narrative stone relief carvings (*c.* 1st century BCE-4th century CE) from the *stūpa* at Kanganhalli represent multi-storeyed *prāsādas* (palaces), mansions and shrines. One narrative relief panel depicts a structure with at least four levels and several flights of steps; lined up along the uppermost terrace are a *stūpa*, an altar, a tree and a domed *caitya* (Fig. 3.7).[20]

3.6. Fragments of the Garhwa lintel, now on display in the State Museum, Lucknow. Photograph taken in 1875 by Joseph Beglar. Courtesy of the British Library.

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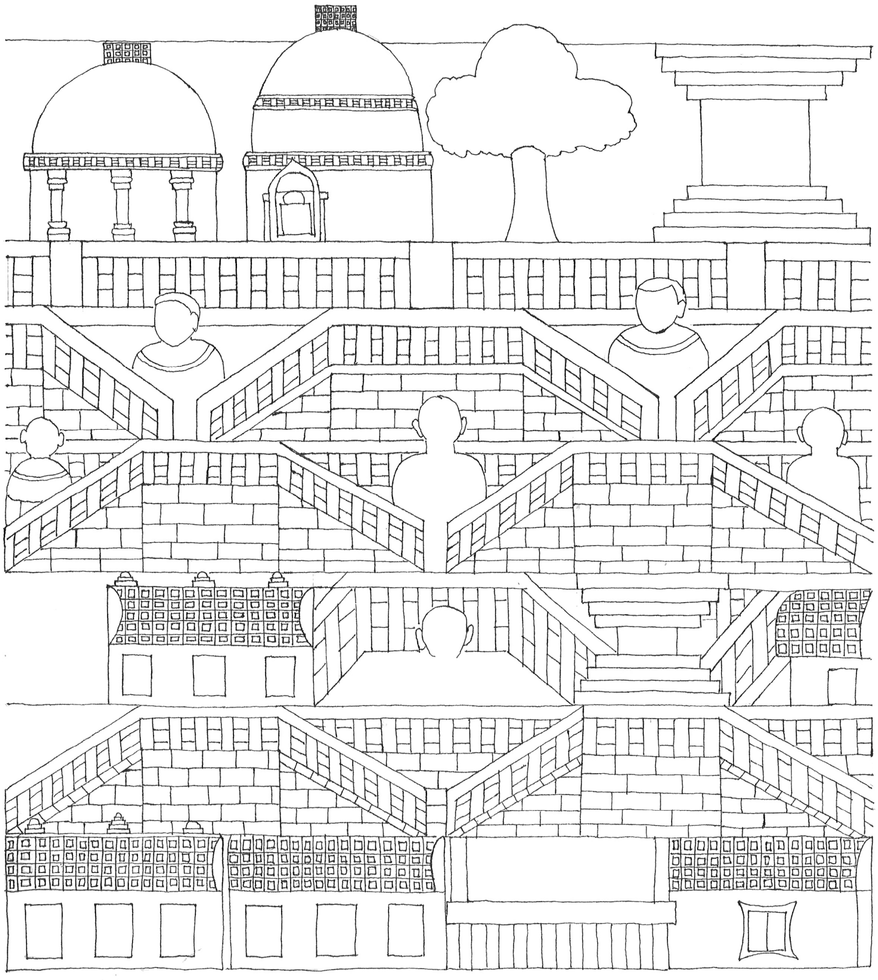
[19] V. V. Subba Reddy, *Temples of South India* (Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2009), p. 41.

[20] See Michael W. Meister, 'Palaces, Kings, and Sages: World Rulers and World Renouncers in Early Buddhism', in *From Turfan to Ajanta: Festschrift for Deiter Schlingloff on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday, Vol. II*, ed. by Eli Franco and Monika Zin (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2010), pp. 651-670.



3.7. *Drawing illustrating a carved stone plaque from Kanganhalli.*

Why Terraced?

Monumental pyramidal platforms served to elevate temples and *stūpas*, thereby bringing these edifices closer to the heavenly spheres, while simultaneously signifying both the religious devotion and worldly power of those who commissioned them. Moreover, stepped structures are not always located in low-lying areas; the Sphola *stūpa* on the Khyber Pass (Fig. 3.8), the Govind Bhita temple at Mahāsthān, and the Pravareśvara temple at Mansar, for example, are all situated on hills or rocky outcrops which already dominate the local landscape. This leads us to the question of why this mode of architecture was adopted for Hindu temples. The grand, awe-inspiring scale of the structures was no doubt the principal draw – but could there have been, in certain locations, an element of religious competition involved? At

Ahichhatrā, for example, the Buddhist community appears to have been extensive and well-established long before the Gupta period;[21] might the construction of two monumental pyramidal temples at the heart of the citadel have therefore, been in part an effort to demonstrate the dominance of Śaivism, or of local Śaiva rulers at Ahichhatrā at the time of their erection?

3.8. The Sphola stūpa situated on the Khyber Pass in Pakistan. The photograph was taken by John Burke in 1878. Courtesy of the British Library.

For the time being, whether or not the appropriation of a Buddhist type of architecture is symbolically significant remains an unknown quantity. Scholars such as Wendy Doniger, Giovanni Verardi, Paul Dundas and Alexis Sanderson bring to light the somewhat tense relationship between orthodox Hindus and non-orthodox/ non-Vedic

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[21] A number of high quality sandstone Buddhist sculptures dating from the early Kuṣāṇa or Pañcāla period were found at Ahichhatrā (see for example, Fig. 1.4.). Moreover, Cunningham believed that the *stūpa* known locally as *Chhatra* was a Mauryan structure, being similar in form to the Bhilsa topes such as the *stūpa* at Sāñcī. This has not been verified however. See Cunningham, *Four Reports,* p. 256.

Buddhists and Jains during the Gupta and early medieval periods, despite the continued patronage of Buddhism by the elite.[22] Indeed, Doniger comments that:

> …by the Gupta age heresy was in the eye of the beholder. To the Hindus as a whole, Buddhists and Jains (and Cārvākas or materialists, with whom the former two are often confused) are heretics. To many Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas are heretics, and to many Śaivas, Vaiṣṇavas are heretics. To many North Indians, South Indians were regarded as heretics. And just to round things out, the Jains regarded the Hindus as heretics.[23]

Religious hostilities are entrenched in some textual sources dating to the fifth and sixth centuries CE such as in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*.[24] Whether these tensions also manifested themselves visually through temple architecture and iconography is not transparent, but cannot be entirely ruled out. The Chinese pilgrim Faxian describes a situation at Śrāvastī whereby 'heretical Brāhmans', apparently envious of the many Buddhist *stūpas* in the city, had sought to exact revenge by constructing a very tall temple which cast a shadow over an important statue of the Buddha situated in a sizeable temple, over eighteen metres in height.[25] The tale concludes with the brāhmaṇas seeing the error of their ways and converting to Buddhism.[26] Verardi hastily jumps to the conclusion that this episode at Śrāvastī, which is probably anecdotal, signifies that the destruction of *stūpas* by brāhmaṇas in the Gupta period must have occurred elsewhere.[27] He continues:

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[22] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, 'The Image of the Heretic in the Gupta Puranas', in *Essays on Gupta Culture*, ed. by Bardwell L. Smith (Columbia: South Asia Books, 1983), pp. 107-124 (p. 107). See also Hans Bakker, 'Royal patronage and Religious Tolerance - The Formative Period of Gupta-Vakataka Culture', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 20 (2010), pp. 461-475. Bakker draws attention to the religious tolerance demonstrated by the Gupta rulers and their chief officials through their patronage of religious monuments and institutions belonging to faiths other than their own. Sanderson suggests, however, that while governments exercised a tolerant attitude towards religions, the religions themselves were not always tolerant of each other. Sanderson proceeds to illustrate this point with many fascinating examples from numerous early texts. See Alexis Sanderson, Tolerance, Exclusivity, Inclusivity, and Persecution in Indian Religion During the Early Mediaeval Period', in *Honoris Causa: Essays in Honour of Aveek Sarkar*, ed. by John Makinson (London: Allen Lane, 2015), pp. 155-224 (p. 159). See also Agrawala, *Gupta Art*, p. 16. Here, Agrawala describes the devotion of the Vaiṣṇava Gupta rulers for Śiva.

[23] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Image of the Heretic*, p. 116.

[24] Paul Dundas, 'Floods, Taxes, and a Stone Cow: A Jain Apocalyptic Account of the Gupta Period', in *South Asian Studies*, 30 (2014), pp. 230-244 (p. 230); and Giovanni Verardi, *Hardships and Downfall of Buddhism in India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2011), p. 128.

[25] Verardi, p. 134.

[26] Ibid., pp. 134-135.

[27] Ibid., p. 135.

> The construction of a Brahmanical rival temple just opposite a Buddhist temple provided with a particular symbolic meaning (Devadatta's final defeat), is an early testimony of the encircling technique brāhmaṇas resorted to, along with the harassing techniques observed in Ayodhyā, when getting rid of their adversaries was either impossible or untimely.[28]

And moreover that:

> The excavations carried out at Maheth [Śrāvastī] in the latter half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the last century are rather confusing; yet there is some ground to believe that an anti-Buddhist revolt, implicit in Faxian's narrative, was actually kindled. A temple decorated with panels depicting scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* was apparently erected in Gupta times on the remains of a Kuṣāṇa monument of uncertain nature and, as reported by Jean Philippe Vogel, of two stūpas.[29]

Incidentally, the monumental terraced temple dedicated to Śiva at Ahichhatrā was also constructed on the ruins of an apsidal or circular Kuṣāṇa monument of an uncertain nature.[30] The question of whether this is significant will be returned to in Chapter 6.

Chronology of Terraced Monuments

The precise chronology of the extant Hindu terraced structures is not possible to determine at this stage due to the paucity of relevant epigraphic material and excavation reports. Moreover, none of the structures have been scientifically dated. Nevertheless, based on a comparison of iconography and decorative architectural features it is a definite possibility that the temple at Pawāyā, in its first phase at least, is the earliest surviving Hindu terraced monument, closely followed by ACII at Ahichhatrā. This hypothesis will be dealt with in Chapter 4.

For the purposes of this study the terraced structures at Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā will be explored in detail, while an overview will be given of each of the other monuments in the Appendix at the end of the thesis.

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[28] Ibid., p. 135.

[29] Ibid., p. 137. For a brief discussion of the structure known as Kacchi-Kuṭi see Appendix 2.

[30] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 150.

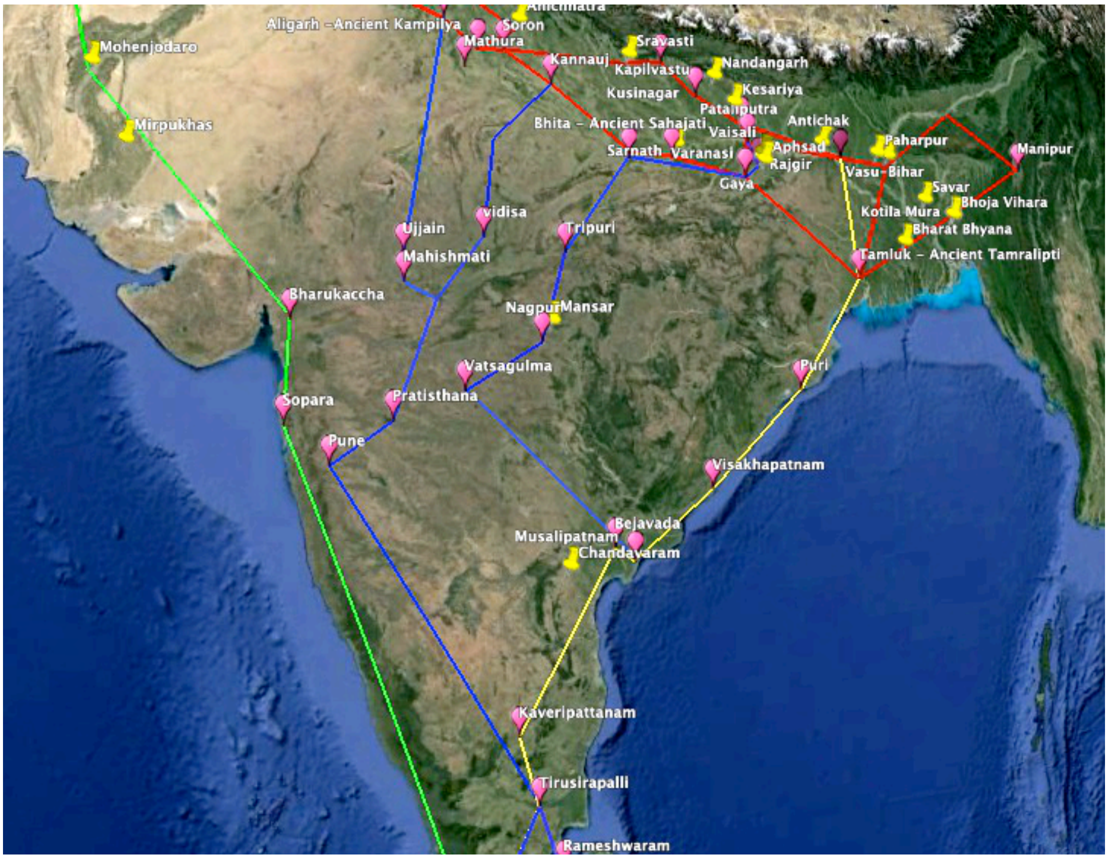
Table 3.1. List of terraced structures in the subcontinent.

Type of Structure and Name	**Location**	**Approximate Date**
Site.1 Terraced Structure	Mohenjodaro, Sind, Pakistan	Terraces thought to be bronze age but could be later. Stūpa 2nd century CE
Buddhist *Stūpa*	Chandavaram, Prakasam, Andhra Pradesh	*c.* 2nd century BCE (with expansion in the 1st/ 2nd century CE and later)
Apsidal Temple or *Stūpa*	Rajgir, Baḍgāon, Bihar	First phase may be pre-Mauryan or Mauryan
Sphola *Stūpa*	Zarai Village, near Jamrud, Khyber Pass, Pakistan	2nd to 5th Centuries CE
Uttarasena's *Stūpa*	Near Barikot, Swāt, Pakistan	*c.* 2nd/ 3rd century CE?
Top-Dara *Stūpa*	Top-Dara Valley, near Haibat-Grām, Swāt, Pakistan	*c.* 2nd/ 3rd century CE?
Tokar-Dara *Stūpa*	Near Barikot, Swāt, Pakistan	*c.* 2nd/ 3rd century CE?
Gumbatūna *Stūpa*	Gumbatūna Village, Swāt, Pakistan	*c.* 2nd/ 3rd century CE
Shināsī *Stūpa*	Guligrām Village, Saidu, Pakistan	*c.* 2nd/ 3rd century CE?
Amluk-Dara *Stūpa*	Near Nawagai Village, Mount Elum, Swāt, Pakistan	*c.* 2nd/ 3rd century CE?
Buddhist *Stūpa*	Naṅdangarh, Champaran, Bihar	4th Century CE with later renovations
Kacchi Kuṭi also known as Ananthapindika's *Stūpa*, apparently started out as a Buddhist monument but became a Hindu shrine later on.	Śrāvastī, Maheth, Uttar Pradesh	Earliest phase dates to the 2nd century CE with later renovations

Pakki Kuṭi	Śrāvastī, Maheth, Uttar Pradesh	Earliest phase dates to the 2nd century CE with later renovations
Viṣṇu Temple	Pawāyā, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh	First phase 5th Century CE or a bit earlier
ACII Temple	Ahichhatrā, Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh.	4th or 5th century CE
Śiva Temple	Mansar, Nagpur, Maharashtra	Early 5th Century CE
Residential or Religious structure	Mansar, Nagpur, Maharashtra	Early 5th Century CE
ACI or Bhimgaja Śiva Temple	Ahichhatrā, Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh	5th or 6th Century CE
Probable Buddhist Structure	Gobind Bhita, Mahāsthān, Bogra, Bangladesh	5th Century CE
Chaukhandi *Stūpa*	Sārnāth, Vārāṇasī, Uttar Pradesh	5th Century CE
Buddhist *Stūpa*	Kahu-jo-daro, Mīrpur Khās, Sind, Pakistan	5th Century CE
Jetavana Vihāra	Śrāvastī, Saheth, Uttar Pradesh	*c.* 5th Century with later renovations and alterations
Bharat Bhayan Temple	Jessore, Kesabpur, Bangladesh	Said to be *circa* mid 5th Century CE but this has not been substantiated
Buddhist *Stūpa*	Kesariyā, Champaran, Bihar	5th Century CE with later (8th century?) renovations
Laksindarer Medh: Śiva Temple or Buddhist *Stūpa*	Gokul, Mahāsthān, Bogra, Bangladesh	Late 5th Century CE
Buddhist *Stūpa*	Harwan, Srinigar, Jammu and Kashmir	5th or 6th Century CE

Buddhist *Vihāra*	Nālandā, Baḍgāon, Bihar	6th-7th Centuries CE
Viṣṇu Temple	Aphṣāḍ, Gayā, Bihar	7th Century CE
Sālban Vihāra	Comilla, Maināmatī (Paṭṭikera), Bangladesh	Mid-7th Century CE with later additions
Harish Chandra Raja Bari *Stūpa* (?)	Savar, near Dhaka, Bangladesh	*c*. 7th-8th Centuries CE
Koṭilā Murā	Kotbari, Maināmatī, Bangladesh	*c*. 7th Century CE with later additions.
Itakhola Murā *Stūpa*	Kotbari, Maināmatī, Bangladesh	*c*. 7th/8th Century CE with later additions
Ushkur *Stūpa*	Ushkur, Baramulla, Kashmir	8th Century CE
Chankuna *Stūpa*	Paraspora (Parihasapura), Near Srinigar	8th Century CE
Somapura *Mahāvihāra*	Pāhāṛpur, Nagaon, Bangladesh	8th Century CE
Buddhist *Vihāra* (Vikramaśīlamahāvihāra?)	Antichak, Bhāgalpur, Bihar	8th/9th Century CE
Sobhnāth Jain Temple	Śrāvastī, Maheth, Uttar Pradesh	Medieval temple surmounting earlier platforms.
Buddhist Temple	Vasu-Bihar, Mahāsthān, Bogra, Bangladesh	*c*. 10th/ 11th Centuries

Geographic Spread of Terraced Monuments



3.9. The National Highways: Uttarāpatha in red, Dakṣiṇāpatha in blue, Pubbantapatha in yellow, and Aprāntapatha in green. Yellow pins show the location of the terraced structures, and pink pins, the major cities along the highways.

There were four major national highways (*Mahāpatha*) in India (Figs. 3.9 and 3.10).[31] The first route, mentioned earlier in the chapter, is known as the *Uttarāpatha* or National Highway No.1. This route begins in Taxila,[32] from where it runs northwestwards towards Begram in Afganisthan, and northeastwards[33] culminating at Manipur. Another branch of the *Uttarāpatha* starts in Tāmralipti (modern Tamluk) in the east and ends at the Bolan Pass in the west.[34] The majority of extant terraced brick structures are situated near the branches of this highway, almost the entirety of which was located in the Gupta Empire at its peak. Later we find other clusters of terraced

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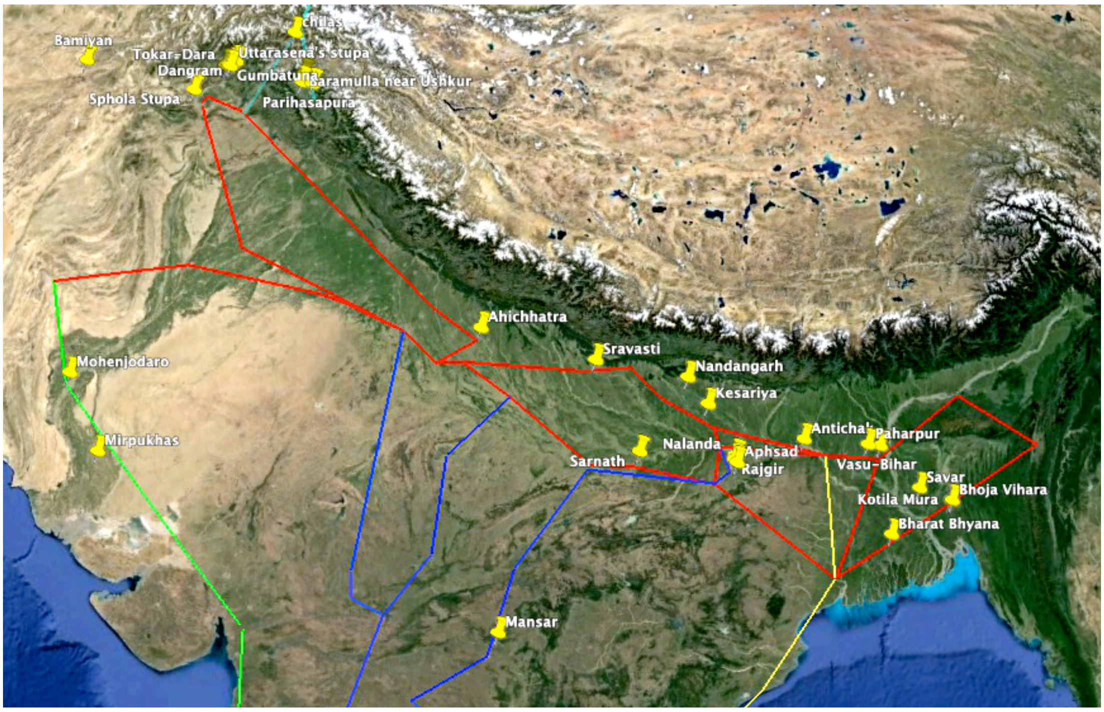
[31] Prakash Charan Prasad, *Foreign Trade and Commerce in Ancient India* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1977), pp. 108-109.
[32] Dar, p. 36.
[33] According to Dar, p. 36.
[34] Prasad, p. 110.

monuments appearing in different kingdoms, namely within the heartland of the Pāla Empire (Bengal) and the Chandra territory which encompassed Harikela (in present day East Bengal), Vaṅga, and Samataṭa, where Maināmatī is located.



3.10. Trade routes and locations of terraced monuments in North and Central India, Kashmir, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The Gupta structure at Pawāyā is situated on the branch of the *Dakṣiṇāpatha* (National Highway No. 2), which begins in Kannauj and ends in Rameshwaram in the south.[35] The Vākāṭaka monuments at Mansar are situated on another branch of the *Dakṣiṇāpatha*, which leaves the *Uttarāpatha* at Pāṭaliputra (present day Patna) and culminates at Bejavada (present day Vijayawada) in the southwest. The early *stūpa* at Chandavaram is located close to the *Pubbantapatha* (National Highway No. 3), which starts in Gauḍa and ends in Trivandrum at the southern most tip of India. The monuments at Mohenjodaro and at Mīrpur Khās are, to the best of my knowledge, the only extant terraced structures on the *Aprāntapatha* (National Highway No. 4), beginning at the Bolan Pass and ending at Trivandrum.[36] Besides these highways, there were numerous smaller intersecting roads along which trade was conducted.[37] It is interesting, although not particularly surprising, to find that all of these large

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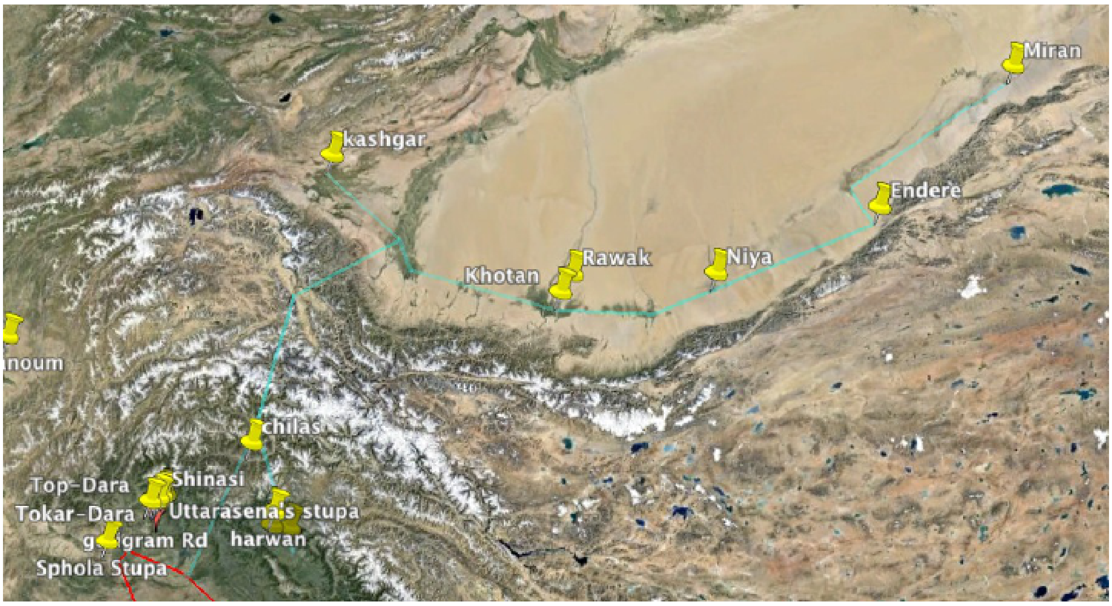
[35] Ibid., p. 110.
[36] Ibid., p. 110.
[37] For example, see Prasad, p. 111.

terraced structures are situated either in the towns and cities that punctuated the major highways or in close proximity to them. The spread of this type of architecture evidently owed much to these ancient routes.

The Silk Road

Monuments of the terraced variety are not confined to the Indian subcontinent. This mode of architecture spread, most probably from Gandhāra along the Silk Road (Fig. 3.11).



3.11. Indian trade routes connected to the Silk Road routes (in turquoise).

Terraced *stūpas*, petroglyphs[38] and votive *stūpas* are found along the route beginning in the Srinigar region of Kashmir passing through the Chilas region of the Karakorum mountain range, through the Gilgit pass and on to Yarkand in China where the road splits, leading eastward through Khotan. At Rawak in Khotan is a *stūpa* with a tiered-base on a star-shaped plan, with staircases facing in the four cardinal directions (Fig. 3.12). The exterior walls of the monument were adorned with stucco relief sculptures depicting the Buddha and his attendants; some of these sculptures were a colossal four

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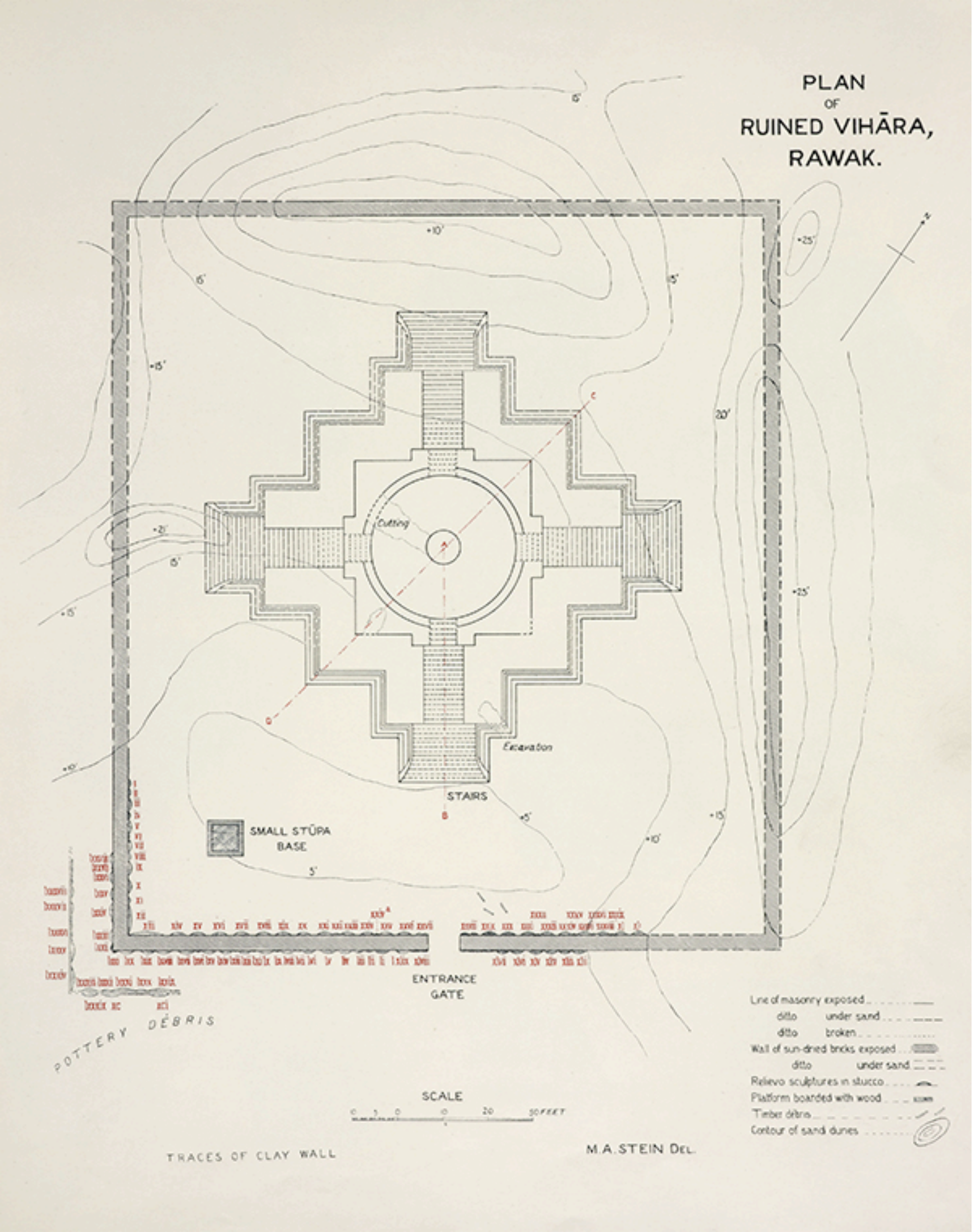
[38] Jorinde Ebert suggests that many of the petroglyphs depicting *stūpas* should be considered as votives. See Jorinde Ebert, ‘Niches, Columns, and Figures in some Petroglyphic Stūpa Depictions of the Karakorum Highway’, *Artibus Asiae*, 54 (1994), pp. 268-295 (p. 289). Moreover, Ebert offers a noteworthy insight on how the petroglyphs can be approximately dated according to the size of their *cupola* in relation to the whole monument. His findings are as follows: 1st century BCE-1st century CE: 63-60%; 2nd-3rd century CE: 48-41%; 6th-8th century CE: 22-18%; 10th-13th century CE: 16-14% (*ibid* p. 269)

metres in height.[39] The monument, which dates to between the third and fifth centuries CE, is the most splendid of the extant *stūpas* along the southern branch of the Silk Road.[40]



3.12. Plan of the Rawak stūpa by Sir Aurel Stein, showing staircases and boundary wall.[41]

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[39] Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road, A New History* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 204-205.

[40] Ibid., pp. 205.

[41] M. Aurel Stein, *Ancient Khotan, Detailed Report of Archaeological Explorations in Chinese Turkestan Carried Out And Described Under the Orders of H. M. Indian Government*, Vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), Plan XL.

A *stūpa* at Endere in Khotan, situated on a multi-tiered base dates to between the fourth and fifth centuries CE (Fig. 3.13). The form of this monument with its dominating hemispherical dome is reminiscent of many of the *stūpas* from ancient Gandhāra. At Niya, also along this branch of the Silk Road, stand the ruins of a simple mud and brick *stūpa* with a terraced base. This monument dates to *circa* the third century CE and had already been plundered before its excavation.[42] The passageway around the *stūpa* was found to contain painted murals of the Buddha but no narrative scenes. In Kashgar, on the northern stretch of the Silk Road, is an early *stūpa* at Mori Tim (second or third century CE), which still retains its dome.[43] The Hungarian-British archaeologist Sir Aurel Stein excavated the latter four monuments in the early twentieth century.

3.13. The Endere stūpa after excavation in 1901. Photograph courtesy of the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

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[42] Ibid., p.53.

[43] See Angelo Andrea di Castro, 'The Mori Tim Stupa Complex in Kashgar Oasis', *East and West*, 58 (December 2008), pp. 257-283.

In the Chilas region of Pakistan there are numerous petroglyphs depicting *stūpas* with pyramidal platforms etched into the rocks, dating from *circa* the first to the eighth centuries CE.[44] These may have served as talismans for the Buddhist tradesmen and pilgrims as they traversed this perilous route from China to India and *vice versa*. At Harwan in Kashmir, terracotta tiles depicting *stūpas* with triple-tiered bases much like those in the Chilas petroglyphs were found nearby the ruins of a *stūpa* with a terraced base constructed from rough hewn rock, and dating to *circa* the late fifth century or early sixth century CE (Fig. 7.12).

There are also two eighth century stone *stūpas* with pyramidal bases at Ushkur and Parihasapora (modern Paraspora) near Harwan in the Srinigar region. The latter two structures were built at around the same time that this mode of architecture was gaining popularity in the eastern regions of the subcontinent. Along the various branches of the Silk Road that run westward from the subcontinent, more examples of pyramidal structures and votive *stūpas* are to be found. The ruins of a palace situated on a terraced base, presumably to give it greater elevation and importance, is located at Aï Khanoum in Afghanistan, while at Top-i-Rustam near the site of the ancient city of Balkh, are the ruins of a brick cruciform *stūpa* with a pyramidal base, now used as an army checkpoint.[45] At Bāmiyān and Tapa Sardār,[46] also in Afghanistan, are some rather beautiful terracotta votive *stūpas* with triple-tiered bases, the lowermost having the form of a lotus, and with staircases facing in the four cardinal directions. These have been loosely dated between the fifth and ninth centuries CE. Graffiti depicting *stūpas* with triple-tiered bases from the second century CE are found on the walls of Buddhist caves at Kara Tepe near Temez in Uzbekistan. A much restored *stūpa* standing on two terraces, which dates between the first and third centuries CE is situated in Fayaz-Tepe, also near Temez in Uzbekistan. Lastly, without doubt one of the most extraordinary edifices to survive from the Kuṣāṇa period is the vast ruined terraced sanctuary at Surkh Kotal (also known as Chashma-i Shir), built by King

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[44] Hansen, pp. 30-32.

[45] Ebert, p. 290.

[46] See Anna Filigenzi, 'Late Buddhist Art in Archaeological Context: Some Reflections on the Sanctuary of Tapa Sardar', in *Religion and Art: New Issues in Indian Iconography and Iconology*, ed. by Claudine Bautze-Picron (London: British Association for South Asian Studies, 2008), pp. 49-62 (p. 51). See also Ebert, p. 285.

Kaniṣka.[47] The ruler modestly named the sanctuary, *Kaneśko-oanindo-bagolaggo*, 'The Sanctuary of Victorious Kaniṣka'.[48] The monument is located in the Baghlan Province of Afghanistan (southern Bactria), and was excavated by Daniel Schlumberger in the 1950s and 60s. The great temple was constructed atop three monumental terraces hewn into the hillside and was built from mud-brick and timber.[49] The temple was situated on a brick platform measuring 47 x 40 m, not dissimilar in scale from the base platform belonging to ACI at Ahichhatrā (see Chapter 6). Fragments of terracotta reliefs modelled in the Gandhāran style were found in niches around the *peribolos* wall (walled courtyard surrounding the temple).[50] In order to reach the temple, one had to ascend four staircases consisting of over three hundred large brick steps.[51]

Some of these structures – in particular Surkh Kotal – are reminiscent of the considerably earlier ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia. At present, however, it is not known whether the imposing, multi-tiered ziggurats were a source of influence for the architects of the terraced Kuṣāṇa monuments.

From around the eighth century onwards, numerous terraced structures of both a Hindu and Buddhist affiliation constructed in brick or stone sprouted up in Burma, Cambodia, Java, Tibet, Nepal and other locations in Southeast Asia, the most notable being the extraordinary *stūpa* at Borobudur in Java (early ninth century CE). Many of these monuments are in a better condition than their South Asian counterparts; for instance, although constructed around half a millennia after the pyramidal Gupta and Vākāṭaka monuments, the tenth century brick Śiva Temple known as Baksei Chamkrong in Angkor, is a rough approximation of how the monuments at Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā and elsewhere may have looked with a temple placed on top of their substantial terraces.

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[47] Matthew P. Canepa, 'Dynastic Sanctuaries and the Transformation of Iranian Kingship between Alexander and Islam', in *Persian Kingship and Architecture, Strategies of Power in Iran from the Achaemenids to the Pahlavis*, ed. by Sussan Babaie and Talinn Grigor (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015), pp. 65-120 (p. 86). For a site plan see ibid., p. 86.

[48] Ibid., p. 86.

[49] Ibid, p. 86.

[50] Ibid., p. 88.

[51] Feroozi, Abdul Wasey, 'The Impact of War upon Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage', *Archaeological Institute of America* (2004), pp. 1-18 (p. 16).

Table 3.2. Terraced structures in Southeast and East Asia.[52]

Type of Structure and Name	**Location**	**Approximate Date**
Buddhist *Maṇḍala* and/ or *Stūpa*	Borobudur, Java	8th-9th Century CE
Śiva Temple	Bakong, Cambodia	9th Century CE
Old Prang, Wat Na Phra Men, Buddhist *Maṇḍala* and/ or *Stūpa*	Tha Wasukri, Ayutthaya, Thailand	9th Century CE
Buddhist *Maṇḍala* and/ or *Stūpa*	Si Thep, Thailand	9th Century CE
Qian Xuan Ta Buddhist *Pagoda*	Dali, Yunnan	9th Century CE
Śiva Temple	Bakheng, Cambodia	10th Century CE
Baksei Chamkrong, Śiva Temple	Angkor, Cambodia	10th Century CE
Pre Rup, Śiva Temple	Angkor, Cambodia	10th Century CE
East Mebon, Śiva Temple	Angkor, Cambodia	10th Century CE
Śiva Temple	Takeo, Cambodia	10th Century CE
Shwe-hsan-daw, Buddhist *Stūpa*	Bagan, Burma	11th Century CE
Shwe-zigon, Buddhist *Stūpa*	Bagan, Burma	12th Century CE
Bayon, Buddhist *Maṇḍala*	Angkor, Cambodia	12th Century CE

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[52] The list of Southeast and East Asian terraced monuments was kindly compiled for me by Peter Sharrock.

Candi Jago, Buddhist and Hindu *Maṇḍala*	Near Malang, Java	13th Century CE
Kumbum, Buddhist *Maṇḍala*	Gyantse, Tibet	15th Century CE

Conclusion

A number of conclusions can be drawn about the emergence and evolution of pyramidal architecture in the subcontinent. Essentially, terraced platforms became an established feature of Buddhist architecture during the Kuṣāṇa period when numerous *stūpas* were constructed on multi-tiered bases with square plinths. While the number of surviving monuments would suggest that this mode of architecture developed in ancient Gandhāra, a solitary South Indian brick *stūpa* at Chandavaram challenges this view, since it is elevated on a two tiered base, and pre-dates the Kuṣāṇa period in its first phase. Whether or not this structure was unique in this region, however, is not known at present. It is likely that the fashion for multi-tiered platforms spread from Gandhāra, across North and Central India, and along the Silk Road into China and Central Asia. In around the eighth century CE or possibly earlier, this type of temple architecture also took root across Southeast Asia. Remarkably, all of the extant pyramidal monuments are built on or close to major trade routes, with the majority being situated along the *Uttarāpatha* – the route that crosses the entirety of North India.

Although pyramidal architecture in the subcontinent is largely Buddhist, from around the time of the early Gupta period a fashion emerged for constructing Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava temples on monumental multi-tiered bases. This trend never really became very popular, however, and moreover, was relatively short-lived, the last known Hindu terraced structure being the seventh century brick temple at Aphṣāḍ in Bihar. Important Buddhist *stūpas* and *vihāras*, on the other hand, were built on tiered platforms up until around the eleventh century CE, becoming ever more elaborate.

Lastly, the terraced monuments in Pakistan and Kashmir are constructed from stone, while pyramidal monuments in India and Bangladesh are built from brick. The brick platforms are constructed on a cellular plan with brick-walled boxes densely packed with earth or rubble, rendering the platforms solid. No doubt, the solidity of these platforms is partly responsible for their longevity.

Chapter 4: Pawāyā, An Early Terraced Brick Temple

Introduction

The ancient Nāga centre, Padmāvatī (modern Pawāyā, or Padam Pawāyā), is situated on the confluence of the Sindhu and Pārvatī rivers in Madhya Pradesh, approximately 65 km southwest of Gwalior.[1] The coordinates for the site are 25°46' 12" N 78°15' 0" E. A far cry from its stately origins, today Pawāyā is a small village surrounded by fields stretching for miles, punctuated every now and again by the tombs and monuments of Sultanate, Mughal and Rajput rulers.[2] M. B. Garde conducted archaeological excavations at Pawāyā in 1925, 1934 and again in 1940-41. Architectural fragments, structural ruins, coins and sculptures dating from the first to the seventh or eighth centuries CE were found.[3] Arguably, the most significant discoveries made were an early monumental terraced brick temple platform and a stone lintel belonging to its gateway (*toraṇa*), carved with relief depictions of myths involving various avatars of Viṣṇu. Joanna Williams has written about the structure and its lintel in *The Art of Gupta India*, which is a valuable point of departure for this chapter.[4] Besides this, however, there is very little scholarship on the Pawāyā monument.

To attempt a comprehensive theoretical reconstruction of the Pawāyā temple is a task beyond the scope of this thesis. Even so, this chapter will deal with the archaeological history of the structure and those formal qualities of the monument that can still be made out, or understood through written records, photographs and through comparison with contemporaneous structures. The aim is to build up a picture of the architectural form of the terraces and the iconographic themes of the temple using all available material. This chapter may ultimately raise more questions than it

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[1] Michael D. Willis (Personal Communication, July, 2014) mentioned how Pawāyā is a development of the name *Padmāvatī*. *Padma* (meaning lotus) becomes *Pau* in some Prakrits, while *-āyā* is a common ending for place names in the area. Thus *Padmāvatī* > *Pau-āyā* or *Paw-āyā*. Moreover, Garde noted how Surwāyā, located 40 miles south of Pawāyā, was once called Sarasvatī. M. B. Garde, 'The Site of Padmavati', in *The Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report 1915-1916*, ed. by Sir John Marshall (Calcutta: Superintendant Government Printing, 1918), pp. 101-109 (p. 105).

[2] M. B. Garde, *Archaeology in Gwalior* (Gwalior: Alijah Darbar, 1934), p. 116.

[3] Garde, 'The Site of Padmavati', p. 107.

[4] Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, pp. 18-20, 52-55.

answers. Yet, it is hoped that it will contribute to furthering an understanding of a once great brick temple and may perhaps lay foundations for a more detailed study of the site. Lastly, the figurative terracotta fragments, the stone lintel and stone sculptures from the temple will be explored in Chapter 10.

Historical Context

The earliest reference to Padmāvatī is found in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, which dates to around the sixth century CE. The city is mentioned here in passing, in a curious statement declaring that nine Nāgas will rule over Padmāvatī, Mathurā and Kāntipurī.[5] Medieval references to Padmāvatī include an eighth century play, the *Mālatī-Mādhava* by Bhavabhūti, set in Padmāvatī itself. Bhavabhūti describes the 'royal city' as follows:[6]

> There where the *Para* and *Sindhu* wind,
> The towers and temples, pinnacles and gates,
> And spires of *Padmavati*, like a city
> Precipitated from the skies, appear,
> Inverted in the pure translucent wave.
> There flows *Lavana's* frolic stream, whose groves,
> By early rains refreshed, afford the youth
> Of *Padmavati* pleasant haunts…[7]

And later:

> Where meet the *Sindhu* and the *Madhumati*,
> The holy fane of *Swarnavindu* [Suvarṇabindu][8] rises,
> Lord of *Bhavani*, whose illustrious image.
> Is not of mortal fabric.[9]

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[5] *The Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, 4. 24, trans. by Howard Wilson, (London: n. pub., 1840), p. 479.

[6] *Bhavabhutti, Malati and Madhava; or the Stolen Marriage. A Drama,* trans. by Howard Wilson (Calcutta: The Society for the Reuscitation of Indian Literature, 1901), p. 102.

[7] Ibid., p. 102.

[8] Garde, 'The Site of Padmavati', p. 103.

[9] *Bhavabhutti, Malati and Madhava*, p. 103.

Cunningham correctly identified the rivers Sindhu, Pārā, Madhumatī and Lavaṇā mentioned by Bhavabhūti in his geographical description of the city as being the rivers Sind, Pārvatī, Mahuar and Nūn.[10] At the confluence of the Sindhu and Mahuar stands a platform bearing a *liṅga*. Although this post-dates the eighth century it was probably the site of an earlier shrine dedicated to Śiva, as described in the *Mālatī-Mādhava*.[11] Bhavabhūti's vivid and accurate description of the rivers and landscape surrounding the city enabled M. V. Lele to identify the unassuming village of Pawāyā as the location of ancient Padmāvatī.[12] We learn little else about the city from the play, except that it may have been a centre of learning – in the eighth century at least – as Bhavabhūti's male protagonist, Mādhava, is sent from Kuṇḍinapura in Vidarbha to Padmāvatī for the purpose of study.[13] The city is also described in the eleventh century *Sarasvatīkaṇṭhābharaṇa* of king Bhoja,[14] and in a stone inscription from the Vaidyanātha temple at Khajurāho (1000-01 CE), which reads:

> There was on the surface of the earth a matchless (*town*), decorated with lofty palaces, which is recorded to have been founded here between the golden and silver ages by some ruler of the earth, a lord of the people, who was of Brahman's race, (*a town which is*) read of in histories (*?*) (*and*) called Padmāvatī by people versed in the Purāṇas.
>
> This most excellent (*town*) named Padmāvatī, built in an unprecedented manner, was crowded with lofty rows of streets of palaces, in which tall horses were curvetting: with its shining white high-topped walls, which grazed the clouds, it irradiated the sky; (*and*) it was full of bright palatial dwellings that resembled the peaks of the snowy mountain.[15]

This text echoes Bhavabhūti's description of Padmāvatī as a glorious city rich with praiseworthy architecture. The inscription also suggests that Padmāvatī's fame may have been both long lasting and far-reaching.

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[10] Garde, 'The Site of Padmavati', p. 103.

[11] Ibid., p. 103.

[12] Ibid., pp. 102-104.

[13] *Bhavabhutti, Malati and Madhava*, p. 2.

[14] Vasudev Vishnu Mirashi, *Bhavabhūti; His Date, Life and Works* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974), pp. 75-76.

[15] *Epigraphia Indica, Volume 1*, ed. by J. Burgess (Calcutta: Government of India, 1892; repr New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1983), p. 151, v. 5-6.

By the eleventh century, Padmāvatī was no longer a thriving city and had been superseded by Nalapura (modern Narwar), forty kilometres to the southwest.[16] During the fifteenth century, Padmāvatī became a victim of the fervent iconoclasm of Sikandar Lodī, Sultan of Delhi.[17] This may explain, at least in part, why little survives from the ancient city besides the terraced brick structure (without its crowning temple), a few sculptures, architectural fragments, brick foundations and coins.[18] Some of the defaced or mutilated sculptures will be discussed in Chapter 10.

Two ill-fated rulers of Padmāvatī, Gaṇapatināga and Nāgasena, are immortalised on the Allahabad *praśasti* of the Gupta ruler, Samudragupta. Here, they are named as being among the Nāga kings of Āyravarta whom Samudragupta 'violently exterminated,'[19] or, according to Hans Bakker's translation, 'forcefully dethroned' (*prabhasoddharaṇa*).[20] No coins of Nāgasena have been found at Pawāyā, but the *Harṣacarita* of Bāṇabhaṭṭa refers to him as a ruler of Padmāvatī.[21] H. V. Trivedi and K. C. Jain have both outlined a tentative chronology for the rulers of Padmāvatī based on coinage found at the site.[22]

The Nāgas ruled at Padmāvatī from approximately the first century CE up until the Guptas annexed the city.[23] Until that point, Padmāvatī may have been the capital of a larger Nāga confederacy with other subordinate ruling families located in Vidiśā (modern Besnagar) and Kāntipurī (modern Kutwar). Bakker tells us that this Nāga territory covered, 'roughly the broad stroke of land to the West of Bundelkhand, south of the Chambal river and north of the Narmadā. The southern part of this country … [included] the North-eastern Mālwa Plateau, the fertile land around Vidiśā known as Daśārṇa; its western frontier borders on the Central Mālwa Plateau with its capital Ujjayinī (Ujjain).'[24] Numerous coins of Gaṇapatināga were found at Ujjain, situated

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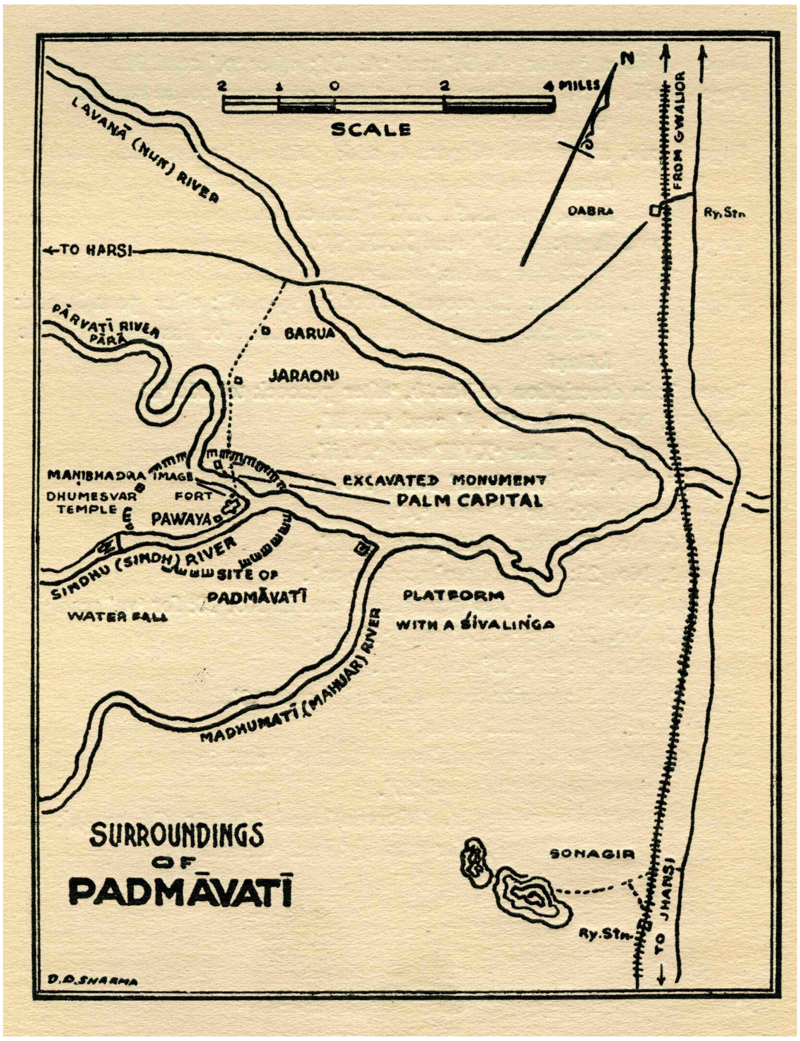
[16] Michael D. Willis, 'An Introduction to the Historical Geography of Gopaksetra, Darsana, and Jejakadesa', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 51 (1988), 271-278 (p. 274).
[17] Ibid., p. 275.
[18] Garde, 'The Site of Padmavati', p. 105.
[19] Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, p. 13.
[20] Bakker, 'A Theatre of Broken Dreams', p. 2.
[21] Kailash Chand Jain, *Malwa Through the Ages* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1972), p. 186.
[22] H. V. Trivedi, *Catalogue of the Coins of the Nāga Kings of Padmāvatī* (Gwalior: Department of Archaeology and Museums, 1957) and Kailash Chand Jain, *Malwa Through the Ages*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1972), pp. 185-187.
[23] Willis, 'Historical Geography', p. 274.
[24] Bakker, 'A Theatre of Broken Dreams', p. 2.

430 km southwest of Padmāvatī.[25] The extent of Gaṇapatināga's territory would have made him a powerful opponent of Samudragupta, and the latter's victory would thus have been all the more significant.

Archaeological Excavations



4.1. A site plan of Padmāvatī (Pawāyā) drawn up during Garde's survey of the ancient city.[26]

In 1915, a few years prior to commencing excavation work at Pawāyā, Garde conducted a survey report in which he described the archaeological landscape and surface finds there (Fig. 4.1). During this exploration he found that the houses at Pawāyā, two nearby villages and a fort constructed in the Sultanate period, were all

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[25] Jain, p. 186.

[26] Garde, 'The Site of Padmavati', Plate LV.

built from bricks recovered from the ruins.[27] The extent of what has been lost from that ancient city can thus be imagined. Garde describes the mound that was enveloping the terraced brick structure (Fig. 4.2):

> The top of the brick-mound near which the capital is lying, has been tampered with, at the point where a small pit and traces of a later platform in which lime and mortar have been used, are visible. But the lower portion of the body of the mound appears to be intact.[28]

4.2. The mound at Pawāyā before excavation, 1933-34.[29]

Subsequent archaeological excavations revealed: a brick monument with three square terraces; the plinth measuring 43 m on each side; the second platform approximately 28 m on each side; and the upper terrace, a little over 16 m on each side (Fig. 4.3).[30] As Garde mentions, there is a considerably smaller, rectangular platform of a much later date on the top terrace of the original monument. The structure, in its incomplete state, rises to a height of just under 10 m.[31] Based on the

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[27] Garde, p. 105.
[28] Ibid., p. 107.
[29] Garde, *Annual Administration Report, Year 1933-34*, Plate VII.
[30] M. B. Garde, *Annual Administration Report of the Archaeological Department of Gwalior State for Vikram Samvat 1997, Year 1940-41* (Gwalior: 1943), p. 18.
[31] Ibid., p. 18.

scale of the upper terrace it is possible that the crowning shrine, which was most probably dedicated to Viṣṇu, was fairly large. Similar examples include the Gupta period temples at Bhītargāon and Deogaṛh, both of which are situated on sizeable platforms.

4.3. The brick monument at Pawāyā from the northwest following excavation, 1940-41.[32]

The Pawāyā monument faces towards the east; this can be inferred from the central projections on the second and third terraces on the eastern face of the monument. Foundations of subsidiary shrines were also found on either end of the base platform on the east (Fig. 4.4).[33] There are further indications of possible subsidiary shrines on the second terrace, where pits are located on all sides. Garde suggests that these could have housed wooden structures.[34] The Pawāyā monument was in use, possibly as a residence, even during the 'Muhammadan period', as the remains of hearths and rooms were found on the upper terrace.[35] In the *Gwalior Archaeological Reports* for 1940-41, Garde suggests that the original two-tiered structure was built by the Nāgas, and shortly afterwards expanded by the Guptas to include a third terrace at the base of the structure.[36] The majority of extant terraced brick structures, such as those at Ahichhatrā, Kesariyā and Mahāsthān, were enlarged at a later date, often more than once; and based on the findings listed below, there is no reason to doubt Garde's assertion that the Pawāyā monument was built in two stages:

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[32] Garde, *Annual Administration Report, Year 1940-41*, Plate III.
[33] See Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, p. 19.
[34] Garde, *Annual Administration Report, Year 1940-41*, p. 19.
[35] Ibid., p. 20.
[36] Ibid., p. 19.

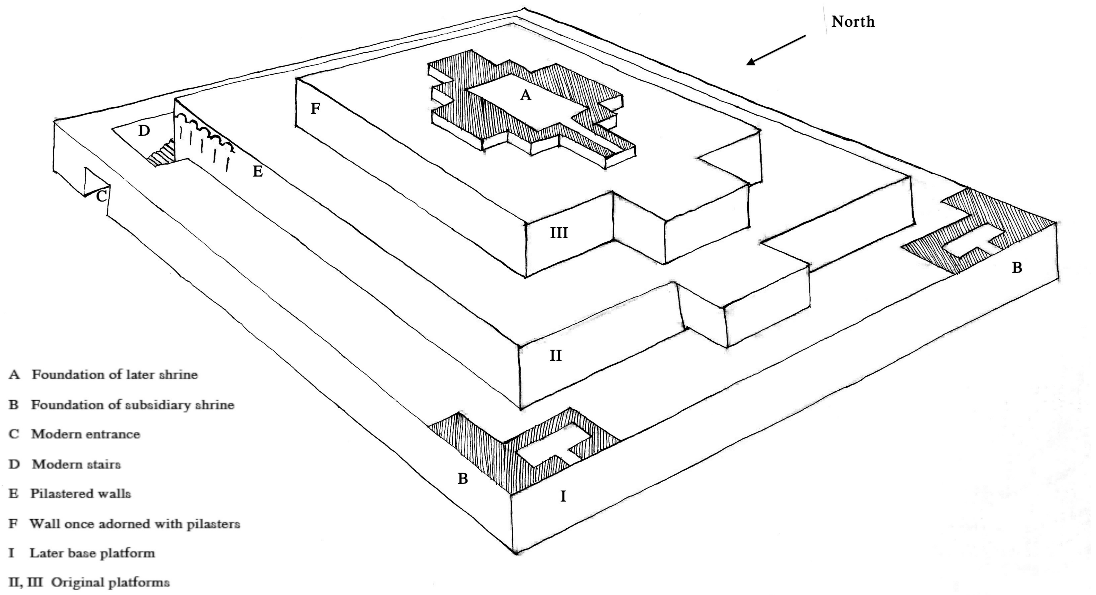
A. The base was enlarged significantly from 28 to 42 m on each side.

B. There is an obvious difference in exterior brickwork between the earlier and later bases.[37]

C. The bricks in the first phase of construction range between 5 and 8 cm in height and are not well baked. The bricks in the second phase measure between 8 and 9cm and are well baked.[38]

D. The foundation beneath the platforms is composed of a cement layer that is double the thickness under the second phase. A masonry layer tops the cement, which is also thicker at the second phase.[39]

It should be noted here that the foundation levels for both phases are similar; this suggests that the length of time between the construction of each phase is unlikely to have been considerable.[40]



4.4. Plan of the Pawāyā monument based on a reconstruction by Joanna Williams.[41] Not to scale, drawing courtesy of Raphael Greaves.

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[37] Ibid., p. 18.

[38] Ibid., p. 18.

[39] Ibid., pp. 18-19.

[40] Ibid., p. 19.

[41] See Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, p. 19.

Dating the Pawāyā Monument

As mentioned above, Garde dates the temple to the Nāga period and suggests that it was expanded during the Gupta era. His argument is rather insubstantial, however, since it is based largely on one inscribed brick thought to belong to the later base of the pyramidal structure. About this brick Williams writes:

> Garde … reports an inscribed brick from the later platform, which he assigns to the fifth century with a confidence in palaeographical discrimination that I do not share.[42]

The earlier structure was built with bricks ranging between 5 and 8 cm in height. These measurements are fairly unhelpful as they potentially span several centuries, from the Kuṣāṇa period to the post-Gupta period. Moreover, the full proportion of bricks measuring 5 cm is not known, hence these brick sizes should not be considered an accurate method of dating the monument.

Garde describes the average brick size on the later base platform at Pawāyā as being 3 inches (7.5 cm),[43] which is in keeping with the brick sizes on the Gupta period structures at Ahichhatrā and Bhītargāon.[44] This adds some credence to his premise that the second phase of construction took place during the Gupta period, although this is not sufficient evidence in itself. It should also be taken into account that Garde may have rounded his measurements up or down.

Over and above the evidence provided by the bricks, numerous coins were also found at Pawāyā. Many of these are datable to the Nāga period.[45] Yet, Garde does not describe the few coins that are reported to have been discovered on the brick structure itself.[46] On the basis of style, all of the sculptural and architectural fragments from the brick temple can be dated to the late fourth or early fifth century CE, either shortly before Samudragupta's death in 375 CE, or during the subsequent reigns of

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[42] Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, p. 52.
[43] M. B. Garde, *Annual Report of the Archaeological Department Gwalior State for Year 1924-25, V. Samvat 1981* (Gwalior: n. pub., 1943), p. 9.
[44] Measurements taken by myself in 2011 and 2012.
[45] Garde, *Annual Report Gwalior State*, pp. 9-10.
[46] Garde, *Annual Administration Report, Year 1940-41*, p. 20.

Candragupta II or Kumāragupta I. There is a striking similarity between the miniature pilasters on the early Gupta period stone lintel belonging to the brick temple, and the pilasters on the walls of the terraces. In general, this style of pilaster is found more often in the Kuṣāṇa period, as is demonstrated by several stone fragments housed in the Archaeological Museum, Mathurā, and by the strikingly similar pilasters on the wall of the *stūpa* at Miran (Fig. 4.11), mentioned later in the chapter; however, this type of pilaster does continue to be used to a lesser extent beyond the Kuṣāṇa period.

Without further evidence being bought to light it is only possible to make the following informed speculations. Either the first phase of the construction of the monument is late Nāga and the following phase is early Gupta; or the first phase is, in actuality, early Gupta and the following phase post-Gupta or thereabouts.

Formal Qualities of the Brick Temple at Pawāyā

Photographic records spanning a few decades show some of the changes or alterations to the Pawāyā monument that have occurred due to a cycle of excavation, restoration, conservation, erosion and so on. However minor the changes, it is important to note that the structure today is a modified version of the monument found at the time of excavation, and, needless to say, represents only the 'bare bones' of the original temple structure.

Bhiṭṭa, Kumbha and *Jaṅghā*

The footing on the later base consists of gradually receding horizontal tiers. Curiously, no staircases were found on this level but this is probably due to the damaged nature of the structure.[47] A stone *makara* waterspout, found *in situ*,[48] projects from the east wall of the base but unfortunately it is rather too crude and simple to date accurately (Fig. 4.5). The original wall of the lowest terrace has been left exposed in the northwest corner by archaeologists, and is reached through a modern gateway in the later wall on the north side (Fig. 4.6a). A comparison of the

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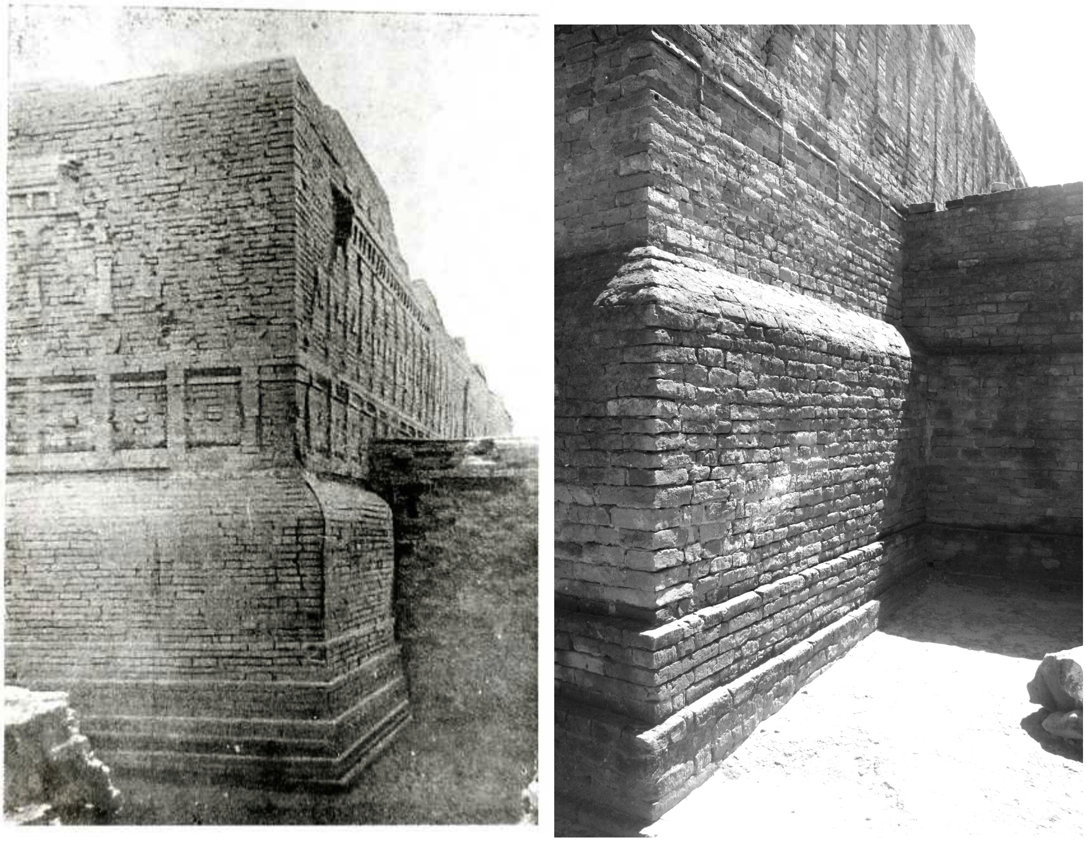
[47] Garde, *Annual Report Gwalior State*, p. 10.

[48] Ibid., p. 24.

wall as it is today (Fig. 4.6b) with a post-excavation photograph reveals that a number of the original details have since been lost.

4.5. A makara waterspout in situ in the east wall of platform one.[49]



4.6. Northwest corner of the base of the monument: (a) as exposed after excavation;[50] *(b) as it appears today.*

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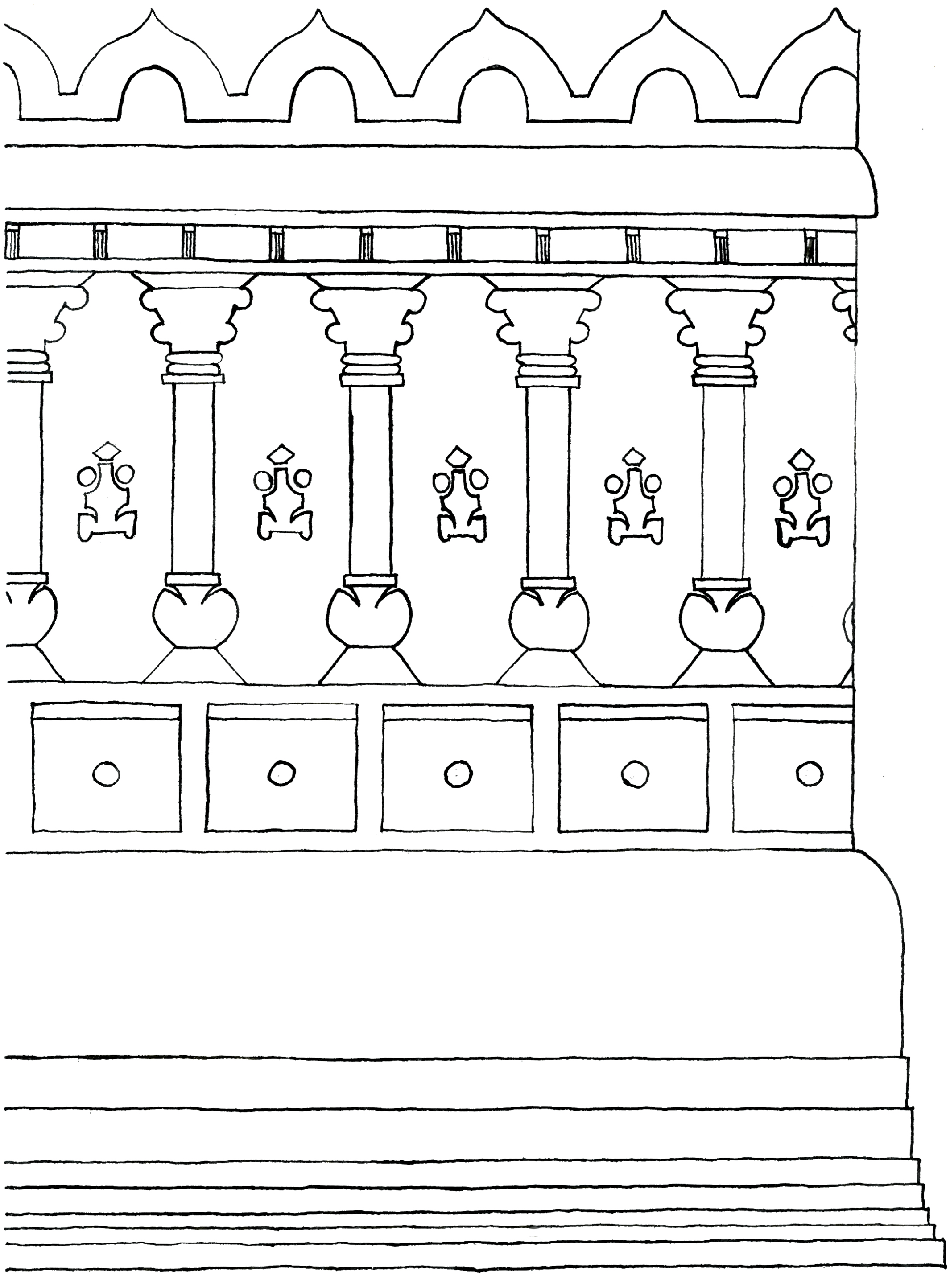
[49] Garde, *Quinquennial Administration Report*, Plate V.

The post-excavation photograph shows the plinth and *vedībandha* (foundation block) still intact. The *vedībandha* is composed of several receding tiers, above which sits a substantial *kumbha* (water pot moulding) (Fig. 4.7).



4.7. Drawing showing the original base of the Pawāyā monument.

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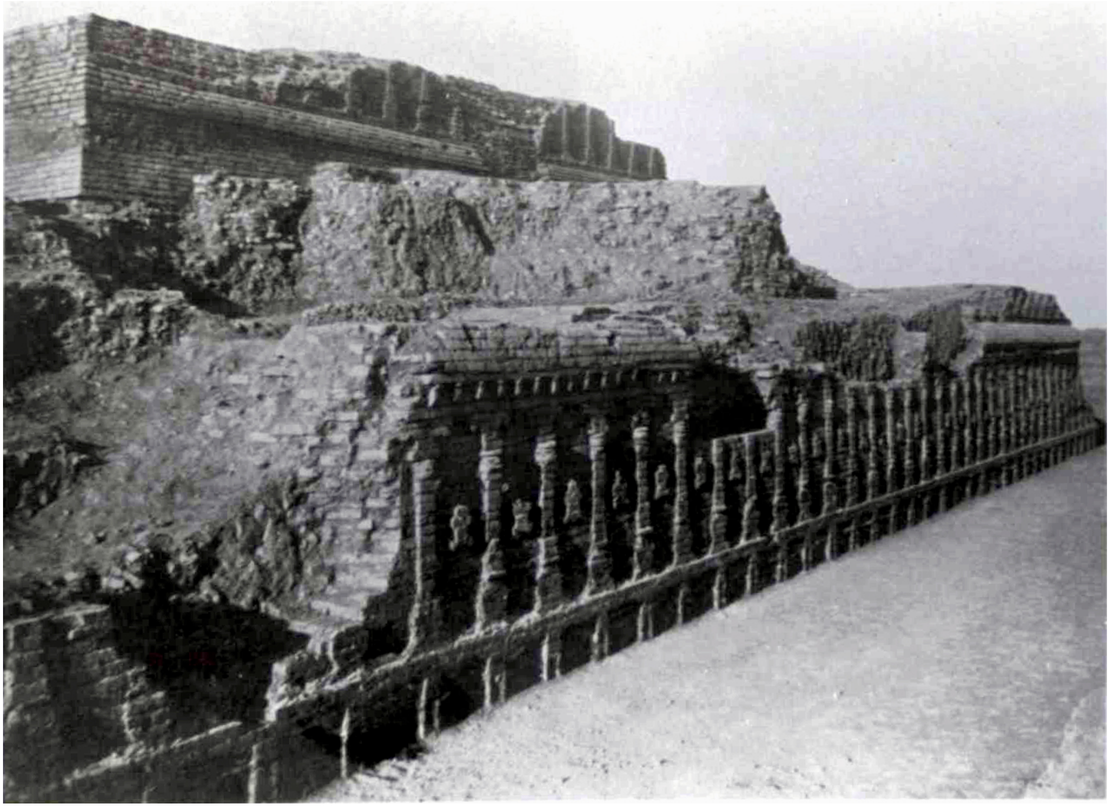
[50] M. B. Garde, *Quinquennial Administration Report of the Archaeological Department, Gwalior State for the Samvats 1998-2002 (Years 1942-46)*, (Gwalior: The Archaeological Department, 1949), Plate VII.

The *jaṅghā* or wall proper begins above this. At the base of the *jaṅghā* is a simplistic relief imitation of a railing (*vedikā* moulding) echoing those found on early *stūpas*, such as at Sāñcī. It is rare to find this type of moulding situated directly above a *kumbha*. One would expect an *antarapatra* recess here, but in this instance there ought to be a *kapota* (roll cornice) situated above the recess.[51] In between each of the bars is a circular shape formed from carved bricks. This may have been the base of a stucco lotus – a motif commonly found on temples.[52] The later base cuts across the centre of the *vedikā*, concealing the *kumbha* and *vedībandha* (Figs. 4.8, 4.9 and 4.10).



4.8. North face of monument showing upper two platforms, 1940-41.[53]

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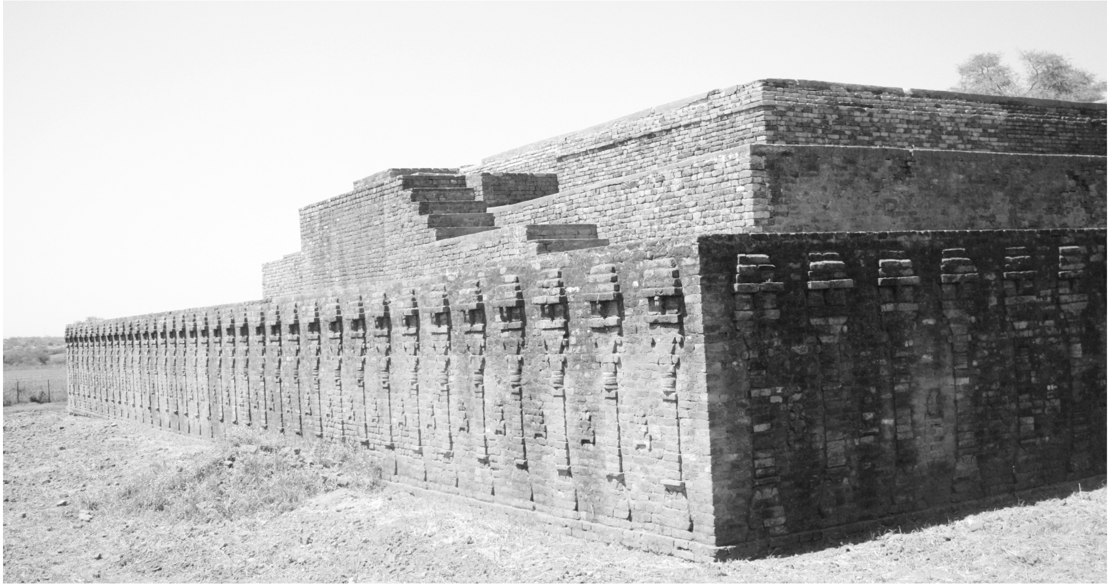
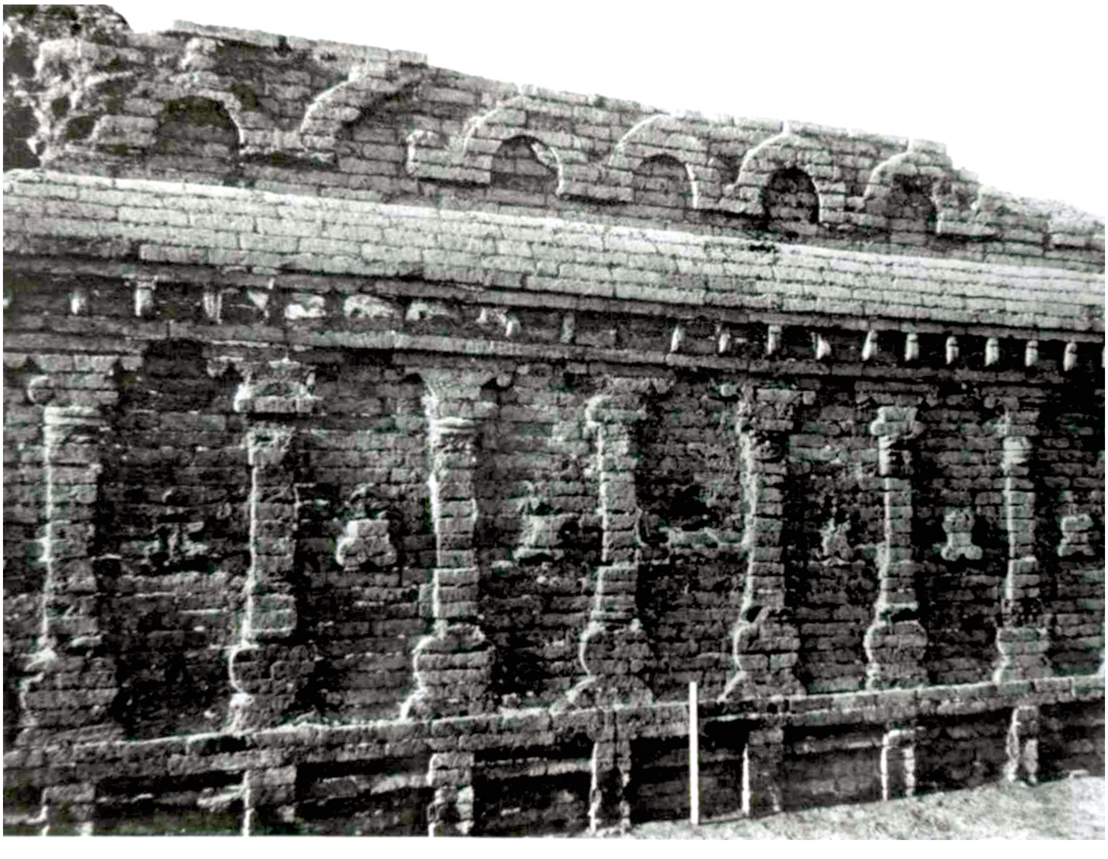
[51] Adam Hardy, Personal Communication.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Garde, *Annual Administration Report*, *Year 1940-41,* Plate III.



4.9. The upper two terraces of the monument as they appear today. Originally, both the second and third terraces would have been considerably taller, with the latter terrace also having pilastered walls. The staircase is modern.



4.10. Detail of wall on second terrace, north face of the monument, 1940-41.[54]

Above the *vedikā* is a continuous row of pilasters, each of which is composed of a *kumbha* foot topped by a rounded *kumbha*, a slim shaft and a *potikā* (bracket)

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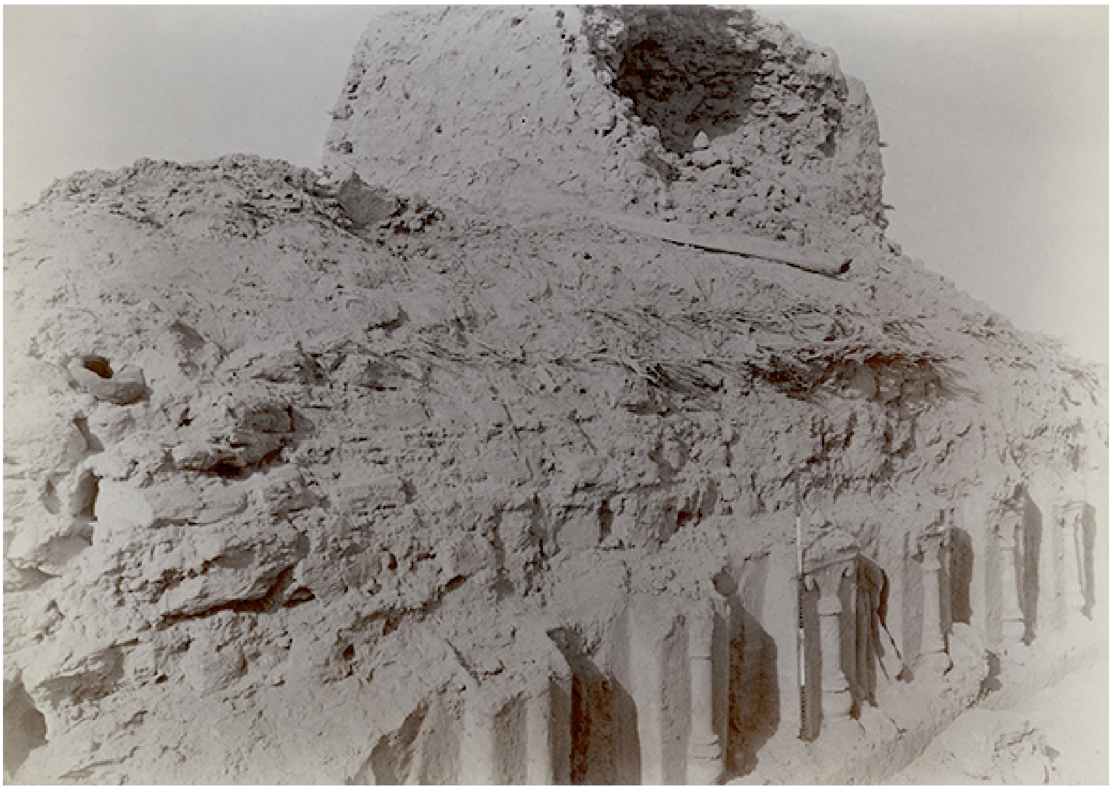
[54] Ibid., Plate III.

surmounting the capital.[55] The pilasters may have originally been coated with stucco or plaster and painted. It is worth noting the remarkable similarity in style between the pilasters at Pawāyā and those running along the walls of a *stūpa* at Miran (*c.* 3rd-5th century CE), located on the southern route of the Silk Road in China (Fig. 4.11), almost 1800 kilometres to the northeast of Pawāyā as the crow flies.



4.11. A pilastered wall of the stūpa at Miran, 1906. Photograph courtesy of the British Library.

The detail between each pair of the Pawāyā pilasters is particularly unusual and at first glance looks to be an abstract motif (Fig. 4.12). This may account for why Williams does not refer to it, or even include it in her drawing of the pilastered wall on the Pawāyā monument. At present the motif looks highly stylized, and somewhat archaic. In a paper published in 2014, I tentatively proposed that this was the base of an image – possibly in stucco – of the shy goddess of fertility, Lajjā-Gaurī, who sits in a squatting position, sometimes on a pedestal. I suggested that the two circular bricks were, in all likelihood, the bases for lotuses often held by Lajjā-Gaurī, one in each of

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[55] Confusingly, '*kumbha*' is used to describe different architectural elements; namely, one of the base mouldings of a temple, and a moulding beneath the shaft of a pilaster or column.

her two hands, and that the triangular brick at the pinnacle of the motif was probably the base for a larger lotus flower with its head facing downwards towards the earth.[56]

4.12. Carved brick motif.

I have, however, since altered my view on this motif and regard the Lajjā-Gaurī interpretation as improbable. This is largely because the goddess bears little relation to the characters depicted in the other sculptures and terracotta relief fragments from the temple, which fall within the mainstream Sanskrit-Brahmanical tradition.[57] It should, however, be taken into account that this motif might pre-date the Gupta sculptures found on the monument by some time. Bakker tentatively suggests that the motif might have been a base for an image of Garuḍa, or Viṣṇu astride Garuḍa, or

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[56] Laxshmi Greaves, 'Pawāyā: An Early Terraced Brick Temple', *South Asian Studies*, 30 (2014), pp. 181-205 (p. 186).

[57] Many thanks to Hans Bakker for sharing his views on this matter.

perhaps even Kārttikeya on his peacock vehicle.[58] The goddess Lakṣmī – the consort of Viṣṇu and a popular deity in the Gupta period – holding a lotus in each hand is also a possibility. Each of these suggestions would fit in neatly with the subject matter of the other sculptures from the temple, and moreover, all feature frequently on the coins or temple images of the Gupta period. This simple motif creates a striking contrast to the pilastered walls of the temple at Bhītargāon, with its large niches exhibiting images of gods and goddesses. Indeed, the decorative façade on the Pawāyā monument arguably looks closer in style to the Kuṣāṇa period Gandhāran *stūpas* than to the Gupta period temple at Bhītargāon.

Above the pilasters is a cornice band which consists of corbels (brackets) treated as bent colonettes.[59] A similar feature, rather more pronounced, can be found on the *circa* second century CE Gandhāran Guldara *stūpa* situated in Afghanistan and on the recently excavated Buddhist temples at Mes Anyak, Logar province, also in Afghanistan. A *kapota* sits above the band of corbels, above which was a *candraśālā* (dormer window) band that has disappeared over the course of the past thirty years. As Williams writes, the simple shape of those *candraśālās* was reminiscent of Kuṣāṇa examples from Mathurā, several of which can be seen at Mathurā's Archaeological Museum.[60] The decorative façade on the second and third terraces belongs to the first phase of temple construction and thus may have a pre-Gupta date. This basic type of *candraśālā*, however, is also found on the Gupta period brick temple at Bhītargāon (see, for example, Fig. 2.62). In contrast, Gupta temples such as those at Maṛhiā, Nāchnā and Deogaṛh have convoluted and ornate *candraśālā* mouldings. Originally the upper terrace also had a similar decorative facing, although the pilasters were situated directly above the *kumbha*. This terrace was unearthed in a very poor condition. Rather than being conserved, it was replaced with a plain brick wall, although the original *kumbha* has survived in places. Traces of a thin coating of lime plaster were found on the walls of the terraces.[61]

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[58] Hans Bakker, Personal Communication.

[59] Thanks to Adam Hardy for the terminology.

[60] Williams, *The Art of Gupta*, p. 20.

[61] Garde, *Annual Administration Report, Year 1940-41*, p. 18.

Ornamental Moulded Bricks

4.13. Ornamental brick fragments bearing a lotus motif. Some of the fragments may have belonged to roundels demonstrated by this photograph. Reserve collections of the State Museum, Bhopal.

Ornamental moulded bricks, similar in style, and probably in date, to those belonging to the Gupta period monuments at Ahichhatrā, Bhītargāon, Sārnāth, Bhitarī,[62] and Śrāvastī[63] were found at Pawāyā, though not *in situ*. At least four of the moulded bricks bear acanthus, triangular and dentil motifs, and are divided between the State Museum of Madhya Pradesh in Bhopal and the Gujari Mahal Museum, Gwalior (Figs. 4.13 to 4.17). Based on a study of the pilasters at Bhītargāon, the Pawāyā bricks probably formed pilaster capitals on the crowning temple or subsidiary shrines. Numerous fragments with a lotus petal motif, common on most temples from

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[62] Zaheer, p. 62.
[63] Ibid., pp. 60-61.

the Gupta and Vākāṭaka periods, were also found. This motif is found around doorjambs, blind colonnades, above pilasters and within arch hood mouldings. Some of the lotus petal fragments from Pawāyā are straight edged, while others have curvature and would most probably have been situated around lunettes, roundels and *candraśālās*. Ornamental bricks from Gupta period temples will be explored at length in Chapter 7.

4.14. Ornamental brick fragments on display in the Gujari Mahal Museum in Gwalior.

4.15. Ornamental brick fragments and sculptural fragments in the reserve collections of the State Museum in Bhopal.

4.16. (a and b) Ornamental brick fragments on display in the State Museum in Bhopal.

4.17. Ornamental brick fragments from Pawāyā.[64]

A Political Agenda?

Julia Shaw demonstrates how, on occasion, the Guptas appear to represent their lordship over the once powerful Nāga dynasties in allegorical form.[65] By politicizing

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[64] Garde, *Annual Administration Report, Year 1933-34*, Plate X.

religion and expressing the superiority of Vaiṣṇavism over all other sects, they, as devotees of Viṣṇu, depict through allegory what, in their view, was an innate right to dominate the earth. Nowhere is this metaphor utilized more obviously than at Udayagiri, where the giant relief of Varāha is shown subduing the nāga beneath his foot, while the crushed and humbled serpent holds his palms together in a worshipful gesture (this image is explored in Chapter 9). Shaw also draws attention to the emblem of the Gupta dynasty, Garuḍa*,* who as half eagle was a natural serpent killer, and could thus be interpreted as being a metaphorical threat to the Nāgas. Indeed, the Junāgaḍh inscription refers to Skandagupta as one 'who forged an order with an effigy, namely Garuḍa, which rendered devoid of poison the serpent rulers who uplifted their hoods in pride and arrogance'.[66]

After arriving in the newly annexed city of Padmāvatī, the Guptas either transformed an imposing pre-existing Nāga monument into a considerably grander Vaiṣṇava structure, or built a new temple from scratch. The fact that this temple was adorned with numerous relief depictions of valiant gods defeating arrogant *asuras* (explored in Chapter 10), may, in part, have been a conscious attempt to reflect the dominance of the Guptas and their victory over the defeated Nāgas.

Further Work

At present our understanding of the ancient city of Padmāvatī is extremely limited, based as it is on the excavation of one large structure, a few surface finds, and fleeting accounts in Bhavabhūti's *Mālatī-Mādhava*, the *Sarasvatīkaṇṭhābharaṇa*, and the Vaidyanātha temple inscription from Khajurāho. Though a field near the brick temple was partially excavated and the foundations of residential structures were unearthed, this was not documented and no plans have been published.[67] In 1942, Garde selected two further mounds at Pawāyā for excavation. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, this

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[65] Julia Shaw, 'Nāga Sculptures in Sanchi's Archaeological Landscape: Buddhism, Vaiṣṇavism, and Local Agricultural Cults in Central India, First Century BCE to Fifth Century CE', *Artibus Asiae*, 64 (2004), 5-59 (p. 47).

[66] Shaw, 'Nāga Sculptures', p. 12; cites D. R. Bhandarkar, 'Junāgaḍh Rock Inscriptions of Skandagupta: The Years 136, 137, and 138', in *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, Vol. III, Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, rev. by D. R. Bhandarkar, ed. by B. Chhabra and G. S. Gai (1981), pp. 296-304 (pp. 299, 302).

[67] Garde, *Quinquennial Administration Report*, p. 15.

work was never carried out. The first mound, described as 'extensive', is located a short distance from the brick temple and is known as Badil Baba. The second mound is described as overlooking 'the bend in the river Parvati near the point where it is crossed by cart track leading from Jeraoni to Pawaya'.[68] Garde thought that the latter mound might be enveloping a Buddhist *vihāra*.[69] These mounds, if they have survived, merit exploration as does the entirety of this important ancient city.

Conclusion

To summarise, our examination of the remains of the edifice at Pawāyā allows us to make the following points about the dating and architectural form of the terraces. First, after having been bricked up for several centuries, the earlier base was, at the time of excavation, the best preserved of all early Hindu brick temple bases and is therefore very significant in terms of South Asian architectural history. Moreover, it is possible, though by no means definite, that this is the earliest Hindu terraced structure surviving in the subcontinent.

The temple platforms were built in two phases with the earliest phase having two tall platforms. Although the style of the decorative brickwork on the walls of the terraces suggests that this stage may date to the late Nāga period, evidence such as the similarity between the pilasters on the lintel, and those lining the walls of the terraces calls this into question, and we cannot rule out an early Gupta date for the construction of the temple. Between each of the pilasters sits an abstract motif, which probably formed the base of a stucco or terracotta image, perhaps depicting a subject such as Viṣṇu astride Garuḍa, or possibly just the latter as the emblem of the Gupta Empire. The structure was coated in lime plaster and possibly stucco in places. This would have given relief and form to the pilasters.

A third platform was added in the second phase at the base of the structure, expanding the monument considerably and making it more pyramidal in form. Subsidiary shrines were situated on each corner of the east face of the base platform. Neither the subsidiary shrines nor the temple crowning the structure have survived.

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[68] Ibid., p. 15.
[69] Ibid., p. 15.

Chapter 5: Ahichhatrā, Literature Review and Historical Overview

Introduction

With its myriads of sprawling mounds and depressions densely carpeted with brickbats and potsherds, its vast ramparts, its monumental pyramidal structures (Fig. 5.1), and its diverse wildlife, the uninhabited ancient fortress city of Ahichhatrā is intensely atmospheric. Moreover, beneath its surface lies a wealth of antiquities and structural ruins, which may explain why treasure seekers and archaeologists have returned to this site repeatedly over the course of almost two hundred years. Indeed, N. R. Banerjee has commented that 'perhaps no other site in India offers such scope for work as Ahichchhatra does.'[1]

5.1. The terraced brick monuments at Ahichhatrā. ACII is in the foreground and ACI (Bhimgaja) in the background.

The pyramidal Śiva monument (also known as ACI or Bhimgaja) located at the heart of Ahichhatrā is the main case study for this thesis, and rather than being

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[1] Cited in Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 2.

explored in isolation, will be situated within its context. This chapter will address the scholarship on Ahichhatrā and its surroundings, as well as the mythology associated with the site. In an endeavour to understand the religious context of the ACI monument, Śaivism will also be briefly explored.

Literature Review

Ahichhatrā is located next to the small village of Rāmnagar in the Aonla Tehsil of the Bareilly district, Uttar Pradesh, and was once the capital of northern Pañcāla, one of the sixteen *mahājanapadas* (polities) mentioned in the Buddhist text, the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*.[2] Captain John Anthony Hodgson wrote the first survey report of Ahichhatrā in 1833 and although Alexander Cunningham refers to Hodgson's account in his compilation of *Four Reports Made During 1862-63-64-65,* it was either never published or, to the best of my knowledge, has not survived. The record of Cunningham's first visit to Ahichhatrā is of great interest since it contains the only extant account of the site prior to any major excavation work. He provides an invaluable overview of the mounds and tanks within the fortress and in the surrounding areas. Particularly relevant for this thesis is his description of the temple mound ACI. Although the account is all too fleeting it nonetheless makes an important contribution towards the development of a formal understanding of the Śiva monument (ACI), especially since he illustrated his report with a ground plan of the foundations of a temple that stood at its apex, and of which little now remains. Cunningham covers as much ground as possible in his report but skirts over the finer details which would have been of immense interest to us now. He rarely attempts to date anything, and aside from the Śiva temple ACI, and the *Chhatra stūpa* mound, no other drawings of the mounds he uncovered, or partially unearthed were published. Neither did he make a record of where he deposited his findings, if indeed they were removed from the site. Cunningham's survey report will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

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[2] Ibid., p. 9.

The history of Pañcāla is first explored in B. C. Law's essay on the *Pañcālas and their Capital Ahichchhatra* (1942), which focuses largely on textual references to the ancient city. The paper was published two years into the large-scale excavations at Ahichhatrā and had not benefited from the archaeological data unearthed during this period. Law writes, for example, that 'the kingdom of Pañcāla must have sunk into oblivion during the Kuṣāṇa and Gupta ages, and we hear no more of it until Hiuen Tsang…'[3] On the contrary, archaeologists discovered that the Kuṣāṇa period was one of great prosperity at Ahichhatrā,[4] and although there may have been a decline during the Gupta period, the vast stepped pyramidal structures are suggestive of a thriving and economically sound community.

V. S. Agrawala's catalogue on the *Terracotta Figurines of Ahichchhatrā (District Bareilly, U.P.)*, first published in 1948, is an invaluable record of the terracotta sculptures and plaques found at the site during the 1940s excavations, and their find spots.[5] The section on the iconography at Ahichhatrā in this thesis owes much to Agrawala's diligence (if only a catalogue of the terracotta art found at the site since the forties could be published!). For all its virtues though, Agrawala's reading of the plaques is sometimes flawed and has been repeated verbatim by scholars ever since. In his introduction, Agrawala also provides a limited but nevertheless important insight into the 1940s excavations conducted at Ahichhatrā.

No full excavation reports from the 1940s have been published, but snippets of information from the excavations can be found in Stella Kramrisch's *The Hindu Temple I* (1946). In her footnotes, Kramrisch publishes the contents of a note she received from A. Ghosh via Sir Mortimer Wheeler, the then director of the ASI, briefly summarizing the archaeological findings following excavation of the two terraced structures. Despite its brevity, this account highlights some of the essential discoveries made by the archaeologists as well as the shortcomings of the

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[3] Bimala Churn Law, 'Panchalas and their Capital Ahichchhatra', in *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India,* No.67 (Delhi and Calcutta: Archaeological Survey of India, 1942), p. 9.

[4] A. Ghosh and K. C. Panigrahi, 'The Pottery of Ahichchhatra, District Bareilly, U.P.', in *Ancient India No.1* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1946), pp. 37-59 (p. 39).

[5] Vasudeva S. Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines of Ahichchhatrā (District Bareilly, U.P.*) (Varanasi: Prithivi Prakashan, 1985, 1st edn 1948).

excavations: for example, how the larger of the terraced monuments had to be abandoned 'before it was fully understood.'[6]

Further information on the archaeological findings at Ahichhatrā during the early 1940s is recorded in a study by A. Ghosh and K. C. Panigrahi on *The Pottery of Ahichchhatra, District Bareilly, U.P.*, published in the first volume of the *Ancient India* journal in 1946. Since both authors worked on the excavations at Ahichhatrā the information can be considered reliable. With an optimism that was never realized, Ghosh writes: 'the report of the excavation has not yet been published but a brief account may be given here of the main results.'[7] M. G. Dikshit published a paper on the *Beads of Ahichchhatra* (1952), which while interesting in its own right, does not contribute to our understanding of the structural ruins of the ancient city.

Using Law's essay as a point of departure, Krishna Mohan Shrimali based a PhD (1976) on the subject of Pañcāla, which was later published as two volumes entitled the *History of Pañcāla* (1983, 1985). Shrimali writes:

> No attempt has so far been made to reconstruct the history of Pañcāla on the basis of combined testimony of literary and archaeological sources. … [the] absence of any history about such an important region of Northern India as Pañcāla, which has contributed in no small measure towards the growth of Indian civilisation, is a desideratum which this study attempts to fill.[8]

The first volume covers the history, literature, trade and industry, religion, economics, and art of the *mahājanapada*, and in particular, of Ahichhatrā; and the second, the numismatics. The thorough exploration of references to Ahichhatrā and to Pañcāla in secular and religious texts is of great interest, as is the numismatic analysis. The chapters on the art and architecture of the ancient city on the other hand leave much to be desired, most especially since the description of the terracotta plaques belonging to the Śiva temple at Ahichhatrā is copied almost word for word from V. S. Agrawala's catalogue on the *Terracotta Figurines of Ahichchhatrā,* complete with Agrawala's

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[6] Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple I*, p. 174.
[7] Ghosh and Panigrahi, p. 38.
[8] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, pp. 2-3.

misinterpretations. Moreover, Shrimali asserts that the two terraced structures must have been Buddhist to begin with, despite the absence of evidence to support this view.[9] It does however, seem possible, as Shrimali suggests, that the ruined circular or apsidal Kuṣāṇa structure over which sit the massive terraces of ACI was a Buddhist *stūpa* or *caitya*.[10] This hypothesis will be returned to in the next chapter.

One of the starting points for my thesis was Ellen Raven's research on the *Brick Terraces at Ahichhatra and Mansar, a Comparison* (2008) which focuses on some of the similarities between the residential terraced structure (MNS2) at Mansar, and the smaller of the pyramidal temples at Ahichhatrā (ACII), both dating to the fifth century CE. Her paper raises many questions, most of which have been explored in my thesis.

More recently a number of papers have been published by Bhuvan Vikrama, who oversaw extensive excavation work at Ahichhatrā on behalf of the ASI between 2005 and 2011. His papers include *Archaeology of Panchal with special reference to Ahichhatra* (2010); (eds.) Abhijit Pillai, Onkar Dikshit, G. K. Rai, R. S. Fonia, V. N. Prabhakar, Bhuvan Vikrama, *Documentation and Visualization of Archaeological Data* (2010); and *The Forgotten Giant: The Earliest Terraced Temple at Ahichhatra* (2012). The first two papers analyse archaeological and Ground Penetrating Radar data, while the latter attempts to theoretically reconstruct the Śiva temple. Vikrama was in a unique position to visit the monument on a frequent basis and makes a convincing argument for its originally having had only three substantial terraces rather than the five 'smaller' terraces we see today.[11]

Every bit as important as the literature on Ahichhatrā are the photographs taken during the 1940s excavations, preserved in the photo archives of the ASI in Janpath, New Delhi. These include images of some of the plans of the site, and importantly, a detailed plan of the smaller of the two terraced temples at Ahichhatrā. Since much of what was unearthed during the excavations was promptly covered up again, lost, or

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[9] Ibid., p. 150.

[10] Ibid., p. 150.

[11] Bhuvan Vikrama, 'The Forgotten Giant, The Earliest Terraced Temple at Ahichhatra', in *Kalash*, 14 (2012), pp. 7-9 (p. 8).

altered through repeated restoration, these images have proven invaluable to this research.

A Brief Summary of Literary and Epigraphic References to Ahichhatrā and Pañcāla

As previously mentioned, Pañcāla is discussed by Shrimali, Law and Vikrama. It should be noted that most references to northern Pañcāla are found in literary sources rather than in epigraphic records. Pañcāla covered a vast territory, probably stretching from the Himalayan foothills to the Chambal Valley.[12] Northern Pañcāla or Uttara-Pañcāla, also known as Rohilkhand – (Uttarakhand and northwestern Uttar Pradesh) – was situated in the upper Gangetic Alluvial plain, with Ahichhatrā as its capital, while southern Pañcāla (Dakshina-Pañcāla) was situated in the upper part of the Doab between the Ganges and Yamuna rivers,[13] and had Kampilya as its capital. Uttara-Pañcāla and Dakshina-Pañcāla were separated by the River Bhāgīrathī.[14]

That Pañcāla was an important 'centre' of religion is recorded in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa,* which tells us that 'the Brahmins who had settled in different parts of Pañchāla and were patronised by its kings were to be counted not by hundreds and thousands but by millions.'[15] Moreover, "speech sounds higher here among the Kuru-Pañchālas," which as Law points out, indicates the recitation of the Vedas.[16] Aside from being thoroughly religious, they were also intellectual, and Shrimali explores at length how much of the later Vedic literature was written by citizens of Kuru-Pañcāla.[17] The Upaniṣads contain philosophical dialogues of the Kṣatriya king of Pañcāla, Pravāhaṇa Jaivali, which speculate on the eternal nature of the soul, rebirth and the absence of an immortal soul in animals.[18] Furthermore, they were masters in the art of love; Vātsyāyana notes that his *Kāmasūtra* was based upon the treatise of

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[12] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 20.
[13] Ibid., p. 20.
[14] Shubra Sharma, *Life in the Upanishads* (New Delhi: Ahinav Publications, 1985), p. 47.
[15] Law, p. 9.
[16] Ibid., p. 9.
[17] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 121.
[18] Ibid., p. 122. Shrimali refers to the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 1.8; V. 3; IX.1; *Brihadaranyaka Upaniṣad,* VI. 2.

Bābhravya of Pañcāla.[19] Pañcāla, though, is most well known for its role in the *Mahābhārata*, with the epic taking place in the Kuru-Pañcāla kingdoms. Famously, Draupadī, wife of the five Pāṇḍava brothers, is also called Pañcālī.[20] Ahichhatrā is mentioned on a number of occasions in the *Mahābhārata*, and these references will be explored at the end of the chapter. The reputation of the Pañcālas takes a turn for the worse in later centuries when we learn from Vātsyāyana that the people of Ahichhatrā had regressed in their characters, perhaps, as Shrimali points out, due to their contact with the foreign Kuṣāṇa rulers.[21] Echoing this, Kumārila in his *Tantravārttikā* (*c*. 650-750 CE) writes that even the 'brāhmaṇa women of Ahichhatrā and Mathura were addicted to wine.'[22] Later, under king Bhoja, Pañcāla became renowned as a centre of poetry.[23]

Chronology of the Settlement at Ahichhatrā

The earliest settlement at the site is indicated by the presence of ochre-coloured pottery,[24] which broadly dates to the second millennium BCE, while the first epigraphical mention of Ahichhatrā is found in a cave inscription in Pabhosā, District Kauśāmbī, dating to *circa* the first century BCE. The inscription reads:

> Caused to be made by Ashadhasena, son of the Vaihidari, (and) son of the Rajan Tevanipuutra-Bhagavata, son of Vangapala Rajan of Adhichhatrā (and) son of Sonakayana.[25]

A clay seal also from Pabhosā bears the legend *Adhicha rāyā Rāño Śonakāyanaputrasa Vaṅgapālasa*, likewise suggesting that Vaṅgapāla was a king of

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[19] Law, p. 10.

[20] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 1.

[21] Ibid., p. 22.

[22] Ibid., p. 22. Shrimali cites the *Tantravārttikā* (Ānandāśrama Press ed.), p. 204; and *HD*, III, p. 848 n. 1645.

[23] Law, p. 11.

[24] Bhuvan Vikrama, 'Archaeology of Panchal with Special Reference to Ahichhatra', in *Papers Presented at International Seminar on "How Deep are the Roots of Indian Civilization? An Archaeological and Historic Perspective"* (New Delhi: Draupadi Trust, 25th-27th November 2010), pp. 296-305 (p. 297).

[25] J. F. Fleet, 'The Pabhosa Inscriptions', *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* (Jan. 1914), pp. 89-93.

Adhicchatra, or Ahichhatrā.[26] An inscription found in the village of Rāmnagar (adjoining Ahichhatrā), dating from the "Scythian period", also refers to the city as Adhicchatra;[27] it is, however, only one of the many names by which the ancient fortress city has been called through the centuries. Ptolemy, for example, names it Adisadra,[28] and the Chinese pilgrim Xungzang, O-hi-chi-ta-lo.[29] In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, it is called Ahikṣetra. In the *Harivaṃśa* and *Aṣṭādhyāyī* it is known variously as Ahikṣetra, Ahikṣattra, and Ahichhatrā.[30] Among its other names are: Ādikṣetra,[31] Adikot,[32] Paricakra or Parivakra, Chatravatī,[33] and Saṃkhyāvatī.[34] A Gupta period seal held in the Central Antiquity Collection of the ASI in the Purana Qila describes Ahichhatrā as a *bhukti* (regional headquarter), as does the Banskhera copperplate inscription of king Harṣavardhana.[35] The clay sealing (no. 963) reads *śrī-Ahichchhatrā-bhuktau kumārāmātyāyādhikarṇasya* ("of the office of the Kumārāmātyā[36] in the division of Ahichhatrā").[37] As an aside, the seal was found in the mound designated as ACIV approximately 200 m south of Bhimgaja (ACI).[38] Other seals bearing the names of Gupta officials have also been found at the site, such as one that reads, '*śrī-uparikādhi-karṇasya*'.[39] A seal from Ahichhatrā bears a long legend naming many *mahārājas*, all with their names ending in *mitra* (for example, Sumitra, Sūryamitra, and Bhūmimitra), the last king cited is Achyuta who in all likelihood is the Nāga ruler recorded on the Allahabad *praśasti* of Samudragupta.[40] The Pañcāla coins indicate that there were at least forty-eight Mitra kings who ruled from around the first century BCE up until Ahichhatrā was absorbed into the Gupta

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[26] Gupta, *Geography*, p. 35.

[27] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 21.

[28] John Watson McCrindle, *Ancient India as Described by Ptolemy* (London: Trübner, 1885), pp. 133-134.

[29] '*Si-Yu-Ki'*, p. 200.

[30] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 21.

[31] Gupta, *Geography*, p. 102.

[32] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 255.

[33] *Mahābhārata* 1.138 cited in Gupta, p. 104.

[34] *Vividhatīrthakalpa,* p.14 cited in Gupta, *Geography*, p. 104.

[35] Gupta, *Geography*, pp. 101-102.

[36] The *kumārāmātyā* was a high level minister or district governor of the Gupta Empire. See Ram Sharan Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1959), p.324.

[37] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 1ff.

[38] Ibid., p. 1ff.

[39] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 188.

[40] Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, p. 13, L. 21.

kingdom.[41] Shrimali argues that under the Pañcāla kings, Ahichhatrā was both affluent and influential. He writes:

> Both at Kauśāmbī and at Sonkh (Mathurā) only the local coins have been found. But from Ahicchatra, coins of Almorā, Mathurā, Ayodhyā and of the Kuṇindas [a kingdom located in the central Himalayan region] have also been reported, which may imply that Pañcāla was an important centre.[42]

Several Sassanian coins of the third and early fourth centuries CE have been found at Ahichhatrā, but it is not known whether the city ever came under their direct influence.[43] According to Shrimali, only sixteen copper coins of the Gupta period have been found at Ahichhatrā (Fig. 5.2) and not a single gold coin.[44]

5.2. A copper coin found at Ahichhatrā by Alexander Cunningham depicting a bust of Candragupta II on the obverse face. The king is shown in profile and is holding a flower in his raised hand. The reverse face is severely eroded but would have depicted a haloed Garuḍa with his wings outstretched. Photograph courtesy of the British Museum.

The first eyewitness account of Ahichhatrā dates to 634 CE and was written by the Buddhist pilgrim Xungzang (c. 602-664 CE) in his *Si-Yu-Ki* (*Records of the Western*

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[41] Bhuvan Vikrama, 'Fresh Excavation at Ahichhatra', in *Archaeology of India from its Beginnings to 2013 Book II*, ed. by Amar Nath Khanna (Delhi: Swati Publications, 2014), pp. 68-71 (p. 69).

[42] K. M. Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla to c. AD 550, Vol. II-Corpus of Coins* (New Delhi: Munshiram Monaharlal, 1985), p. 7.

[43] Ibid., p. 8.

[44] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 190. It should be noted that more Gupta coins might have been discovered since the early 1980s.

World). Regrettably, however, he did not describe the architecture here in spite of offering a brief account of religious buildings in some other towns. Nevertheless, this is the earliest surviving insight into the ancient city, its inhabitants and their religious leanings:

> This country is about 3000 li in circuit, and the capital about 17 or 18 li. It is naturally strong, being flanked by mountain crags. It produces wheat, and there are many woods and fountains. The climate is soft and agreeable, and the people sincere and truthful. They love religion and apply themselves to learning. They are clever and well informed. There are about ten *saṅghā-rāmas*, and some 1000 priests who study the Little Vehicle of the Ching-liang school [Saṃmitīya school]. There are some nine Deva temples with 300 sectaries. They sacrifice to Īśvara, and belong to the company of "ash-sprinklers" (*Pāśupatas*).
>
> Outside the chief town is a Nāga tank, by the side of which is a *stūpa* built by Aśoka-rājā. It was here the Tathāgata, when in the world, preached the law for the sake of a Nāga-rājā for seven days. By the side of it are four little *stūpas*, here are traces where, in days gone by, the four past Buddhas sat and walked.[45]

An inscription dating to the eleventh century, shortly before the demise of the city, describes the departure of brāhmaṇas from Ahichhatrā for Oḍra-viṣaya.[46] Dating to around the same period is an inscription describing Vodāmayūtā (modern Badaun) as the capital of northern Pañcāla.[47] It is probable that after the demise of Ahichhatrā, inhabitants moved to Vodāmayūtā approximately thirty-four kilometres to the southwest to establish a new capital. Alternatively, Ahichhatrā was still occupied at this point in time, but had lost its hegemony. Vikrama tells us that between the tenth and fifteenth centuries there were several major earthquakes in the northwestern foothills of the Himalayas. For instance, in the eleventh century there was an earthquake so powerful that it caused a surface rupture for two to three hundred kilometres along the foothills. Vikrama conjectures that Ahichhatrā was abandoned because of an earthquake dating to *c.* 1278-1400, the epicentre of which was in the

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[45] '*Si-Yu-Ki'*, pp. 200-201.
[46] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 21.
[47] Ghosh and Panigrahi, p. 37.

region of Ramnagar 120 km away.[48] This argument is aided by the discovery of a multitude of collapsed walls and crushed terracotta images at Ahichhatrā.[49] Incidentally, the first violent and iconoclastic Islamic campaigns in India took place in the twelfth century CE, but it is not known whether Ahichhatrā fell victim to the aggressors and whether this could have had a part to play in the demise of the once great city.

Śaivism at Ahichhatrā During the Gupta Period

Although the Gupta rulers were themselves devout *paramabhāgavatas* (worshippers of Viṣṇu), the tolerance they showed towards Śaivism is demonstrated by its popularity in their kingdom,[50] in contrast, for example, with the rapid decline of Jainism in the Gupta Empire.[51] Śaiva devotees were amongst the important courtiers of the Gupta kings. In the case of Candragupta II, his ministers Śikharasvāmin and Śaba-Vīrasena (Minister of Peace) were both Śaivas.[52] The Udayagiri cave inscription of the king records the excavation of a temple dedicated to Bhagavat Śambhu (Śiva) by his minister Vīrasena.[53]

Based on Samuel Beal's reading of Xuanzang's eyewitness account of Ahichhatrā, it is tempting to believe that Bhimgaja was a Pāśupata monument. The Chinese pilgrim described the fortress city as having 'nine Deva temples with 300 sectaries … [who] sacrifice to Īśvara, and belong to the company of "ash-sprinklers"

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[48] Bhuvan Vikrama, S. Sravanthi, S., Javed N. Malik and Onkar Dikshit, 'Archaeological Evidences for a 12th-14th Century Earthquake at Ahichhatra, Barreilly (U.P.), India', in *International Symposium on Earthquake and Advances in Earthquake Science-AES 2011 (22-24 January 2011) at Institute of Seismological Research, Raisan, Gandhinagar-382009, Gujarat, India: Abstract Volume AES 2011* (Gujarat: Department of Science and Technology, 2011), pp. 113-114. <https://ees.kuleuven.be/igcp567/activities/bhuj2011/Bhuj2011-S16-abstracts.pdf>

[49] Vikrama, 'Archaeology of Panchal', p. 304.

[50] That Śaivism flourished in the Gupta period is made evident through epigraphic records, texts and the remains of Śaiva temples.

[51] Paul Dundas, *The Jains, 2nd edn* (London: Routledge, 2002, 1st edn 1992), p. 115.

[52] Daniel H. H. Ingalls, 'Kālidāsa and the Attitudes of the Golden Age', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 96 (1976), pp. 15-26 (p. 17).

[53] Peter Bisschop, 'Śaivism in the Gupta-Vākāṭaka Age', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 20 (2010), pp. 477-488 (p. 478).

[[Pāśupatas]].'[54] Beal understood ash-sprinklers to mean Pāśupata ascetics, and while they did smear their bodies with ash, it was not an exclusively Pāśupata practice.[55]

Moreover, adding to the confusion, Agrawala identified a figure in a plaque found on the Śiva temple as Lakulīśa, the so-called founder of Pāśupata Śaivism.[56] I have been unable to ascertain the whereabouts of this plaque and nor has an image of it been published, but Agrawala gives a brief account of it, describing the deity as holding an axe (*paraśu*).[57] This figure, then, cannot be Lakulīśa who carries a club (*lakula*), but is in all probability the axe-wielding Caṇḍeśa – chastiser of transgressions[58] – who is discussed at length by both Dominic Goodall and Peter Bisschop.[59] This pre-Lakulīśa deity, described in the early *Śivadharmaśāstra* as a "Great Yogin", may have Pāśupata roots.[60]

The Pāśupatas are the oldest named Śaiva sect and their early history remains largely cloaked in mystery. The obscurity surrounding Lakulīśa, the supposed founder of the sect, is especially problematic. He is said to be both a historical figure (c. 2nd century CE) and a manifestation of Śiva. However, Bisschop observes that 'the name Lakulīśa, or a variant of it, is attested for the first time only around the sixth century, while the earliest images seem to stem from about the same period.'[61] The doctrine of the Pāśupatas is contained in the 'revelatory' text, the *Pāśupatasūtra*, which is essentially a ritual manual. Its commentary, the *Pañcārthabhāṣya* by Kauṇḍinya, dated to *circa* the fourth century CE, 'reinforce[s] the sūtras philosophically as well as theologically, so that the Pāśupata school of Śaivism might be well furnished with philosophical foundations.'[62] According to the *Pāśupatasūtra* and to Kauṇḍinya, for a pupil (*śiṣya*) to be initiated, he must be a celibate brahmin with excellent health and

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[54] '*Si-Yu-Ki'*, p. 200.

[55] Alexis Sanderson, Personal Communication.

[56] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 65.

[57] Ibid., p. 65.

[58] Dominic Goodall, 'Who is Caṇḍeśa?', in *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, ed. by Shingo Einoo (Tokyo: University of Tokyo, 2009), pp. 351-423 (p. 396).

[59] See ibid., pp. 351-423; and Peter Bisschop, 'Once Again on the Identity of Caṇḍeśvara in Early Śaivism: A Rare Caṇḍeśvara in the British Museum?', *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 53 (2010), pp. 233-249.

[60] Bisschop, 'Once Again on the Identity of Caṇḍeśvara', p. 240.

[61] Bisschop, 'Śaivism', p. 483.

[62] Ibid., p. 485. A couple of the earliest references to the Pāśupatas appear in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which is thought to date between the 2nd and 4th centuries CE. See Diwakar Acharya, 'How to Behave Like a Bull? New Insight into the Origin and Religious Practices of Pāśupatas', *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 56 (2013), pp. 101-131 (pp. 103-104).

good mental faculties. In order to attain the ultimate goal of union with Śiva or Rudra, a number of stages would have to be successfully completed. Firstly, the Pāśupata should worship Śiva at a temple through dance, song and mantra and bathe in ashes three times a day. Secondly, he becomes a wandering ascetic, misbehaving at every opportunity, whereupon he will receive abuse from others and his sin will pass into them, and their merit into him. Next, he becomes a recluse, living in an isolated habitation where he will recite mantras. Finally, he will re-locate to a cremation ground and following death, as Bakker notes, will 'reach the Īśvara Reality in the Pure Universe.'[63] Crucial to our understanding of Pāśupata Śaivism is Bisschop's assertion that the doctrine contained in the *Pāśupatasūtra* and its commentary gives an incomplete picture of early Pāśupata Śaivism in practice. He writes: 'The Pāśupata system as outlined by Kauṇḍinya involves a lifelong career of extreme asceticism, which is hard to reconcile with other early references to Pāśupatas, in particular epigraphic records.'[64] Bisschop sorts the Pāśupatas into three groups: The *ācāryas* (teachers, of whom Śiva is the supreme *ācārya*), the *sādhakas* (practitioners) and lastly the uninitiated devotees. That many Pāśupatas would have served the lay community is suggested by a group of seven copperplate grants from Bāgh. These describe donations made by the Valkhā rulers. The grants are given to the Pāśupatas for the performance of worship in temples. The gods to be worshipped by the Pāśupatas are diverse and include Nārāyaṇadeva, Mahāsenadeva (Skanda) and the Mātṛkās (mother goddesses).[65]

One cannot dismiss the notion that Bhimgaja could have been a Pāśupata temple, but Alexis Sanderson in his forthcoming publication, *Rules and Records: Śaivism in the Light of Non-Prescriptive Evidence*, persuasively demonstrates how lay Śaivism was far more wide-spread and deep-rooted, even in the early period, than previously thought. He writes:

> … surviving Śaiva temples exhibit a pantheon of deity forms that does not correspond to that propagated for initiates by the traditions of the Atimārga

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[63] Hans Bakker '*Somaśarman*, *Somavaṃśa* and *Somasiddhānta*. A Pāśupata Tradition in Seventh-Century Dakṣiṇa Kosala Studies in the *Skandapurāṇa* III', in *Harānandalaharī. Volume in Honour of Professor Minoru Hara on His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. by Ryutaro Tsuchida and Albrecht Wezler (Reinbek: Dr. Inge Wezler/ Verlag für Orientalistische Fachpublikationen, 2000), pp. 1-19 (p. 5).

[64] Peter Bisschop, 'Śaivism', p. 485.

[65] Ibid., p. 485.

> [including Pāśupata Śaivism] and Mantramārga. This, I have proposed, indicates a tradition of devotion to Śiva that was independent of the initiatory tradition known to us from the surviving prescriptive texts, one that in all probability expresses the religious sensibilities of the wider population. It is this tradition, moreover, that is reflected in the vast literature produced for the uninitiated in the form of the *Śivadharma* corpus, the various Śaiva Purāṇas, and the multitude of shorter verse tracts assigned to them…[66]

Furthermore:

> Śaivism was a much larger and more diverse phenomenon than the texts of the Atimārga and Mantramārga reveal to us, indeed … those texts are the voices of groups that could flourish only by earning the support and respect of the lay adherents of an underlying, deep-rooted, and widespread tradition.[67]

The strength of lay Śaivism is demonstrated by its durability and continued popularity during periods of royal Vaiṣṇava patronage, for example, under the Guptas and the Hoysalas. Epigraphic and material evidence suggests that during times of increased Vaiṣṇava patronage there was no decrease in the number of Śaiva temples being built.[68] On the basis of Sanderson's argument, Bhimgaja is more likely to have been a temple built or worshipped at by Śaiva devotees belonging to a wider popular tradition, rather than by Pāśupatas who followed the path of the Atimārga. Owing to the lack of epigraphic material for this temple, however, we have to accept that it is not possible to reach a definitive conclusion about its religious origins.

Local Folklore and Mythology

The *Mahābhārata* describes how after being insulted by his former friend king Drupada – ruler of Pañcāla – Droṇa, the tutor of the Pāṇḍava brothers, sought to exact his revenge. The Pāṇḍava brothers captured King Drupada on Droṇa's behalf and

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[66] In Alexis Sanderson, *Rules and Records, Śaivism in the Light of Non-Prescriptive Evidence Rules and Rituals* (Draft, 2013), pp. 89-90 it is described how the Atimārga is the higher path followed by the Pāśupatas with liberation as the goal, while the aims of the Mantramārga were a combination of pleasures, powers, and ultimately liberation.

[67] Ibid., p. 92

[68] Ibid., p. 92

annexed his kingdom. Droṇa proceeded to rule over northern Pañcāla from its capital, Ahichhatrā, while allowing Drupada to retain southern Pañcāla (Mbh 1.140). Later, Droṇa fought with the Kauravas against the Pāṇḍava brothers in the battle of Kurukṣetra, and Ahichhatrā is mentioned as one of the places overrun with the armies of the Kauravas (Mbh 5.19). After Dhṛiṣhṭādyumna (Draupadī's brother) killed Droṇa, the latter's son Aśvatthāmā, a part incarnation of Rudra, took revenge and slew the children of the Pāṇḍavas, along with many great Pañcāla warriors in their sleep at the end of the war.[69] For this deed, Kṛṣṇa cursed Aśvatthāmā that he would roam the forests like a ghost for three thousand years, diseased but unable to die (Mbh 10.16). According to Vikrama, Dikshit and Javed Malik (all involved in recent excavations at Ahichhatrā) this myth is still very much alive today. The villagers residing in the vicinity of Ahichhatrā are said to believe that Aśvatthāmā haunts the ancient fortress city – the city of his father – and it is this belief, apparently, that has prevented anyone from daring to inhabit the site.[70]

Other legends associated with the site include that described in the *Vividhatīrthakalpa*, which tells how a Nāgarāja came before Pārśvanātha (the 23rd Jain Tīrthaṅkara) at Saṃkhyāvatī (Ahichhatrā) and protected him from torrential rains by coiling himself around the Tīrthaṅkara and sheltering him with his vast canopy of a thousand hoods.[71] Virtually the same story is told for the legendary king Adi Rājā, who is said to have built the fortress of Ahichhatrā.[72]

Conclusion

In summary, despite the rather threadbare historical records of Ahichhatrā, this chapter has elucidated the long and rich history of the ancient city, demonstrated by brief inscriptions and textual references, and legends on coins and seals. The coins hail from a number of different centres in South and Central Asia and suggest the

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[69] Bisschop explores the terrible act carried out by Aśvatthāmā, and also his relationship with Śiva. See Peter Bisschop, 'Śiva', in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Volume I, ed. by Knut A. Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Maliner and Vasudha Narayanan (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 741- 754 (p. 744).

[70] Bhuvan Vikrama, Onkar Dikshit and Javed N.Malik, 'Indian Archaeology: Whence-to-Where', <http://indianarchaeologywhence-to-where.blogspot.co.uk/2010/06/ahichhatra-through-ages-in-light-of.html>

[71] Gupta, *Geography*, p. 104.

[72] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 255.

importance of this locality as a stop on the trade route and possibly as a place of pilgrimage. The impressive architectural ruins explored in the following chapter are also indicative of the importance of Ahichhatrā in its heyday.

Several texts mentioned earlier in the chapter, such as the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, the *Kāmasūtra* and the Upaniṣads, paint a picture of Pañcāla as a *mahājanapada* of strong religious, intellectual and philosophical leanings. At Ahichhatrā – the capital of northern Pañcāla – the wealth of archaeological findings of a sacred nature would certainly suggest a keen emphasise on religion in the city, as Chapters 6, 9 and 11 will further demonstrate. Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism all thrived at Ahichhatrā, with Śaivism being perhaps the most prevalent religion during the fourth to sixth centuries CE, at least according to the limited archaeological excavations conducted to date.

Aside from names, little or nothing is known of the individual monarchs who ruled over Ahichhatrā and its environs. During the Gupta period the city was governed by *kumārāmātyās* (high-level ministers of the empire). Little, however, is really understood of what this form of governance meant for the city, and moreover, of how Ahichhatrā was ruled following the demise of the Guptas.

Chapter 6: Ahichhatrā, Archaeology and Architecture

Overview of the Archaeological Site of Ahichhatrā: Introduction

Exploring the excavation history of Ahichhatrā is challenging from the outset, most notably because, of the six archaeological excavations known to have taken place at Ahichhatrā over the past 150 years, all are either largely or entirely undocumented. Alexander Cunningham conducted the first reported excavations at Ahichhatrā in 1862, but mentions that some of the mounds had been tampered with prior to his visit, for example, during Captain Hodgson's survey of the site. He also comments on local villages having been constructed from bricks removed from the site.[1] In and around the ancient citadel, Cunningham discovered several Buddhist structures and twenty Hindu temples (one vast, four large, five medium-sized, and twelve small); only temples I, II and III were situated within the fortress (Fig. 6.1).[2] Cunningham made excavations in most of the mounds, and found moulded bricks in all of them. Only in mounds I and IV, however, did he discover sculptures which enabled him to identify the original purpose of the monuments.[3] Unfortunately, he made no attempt to describe or date his findings. It is worth noting that Cunningham might have removed some of the sculptures that he found at the site, including those from ACI.

The controversial archaeologist Alois Anton Führer carried out undocumented excavations at Ahichhatrā in the 1880s, partially unearthing the pyramidal monument ACII.[4] This might help to explain why so little sculpture was found when the mound was fully excavated in the 1940s, in contrast to the other terraced structure located

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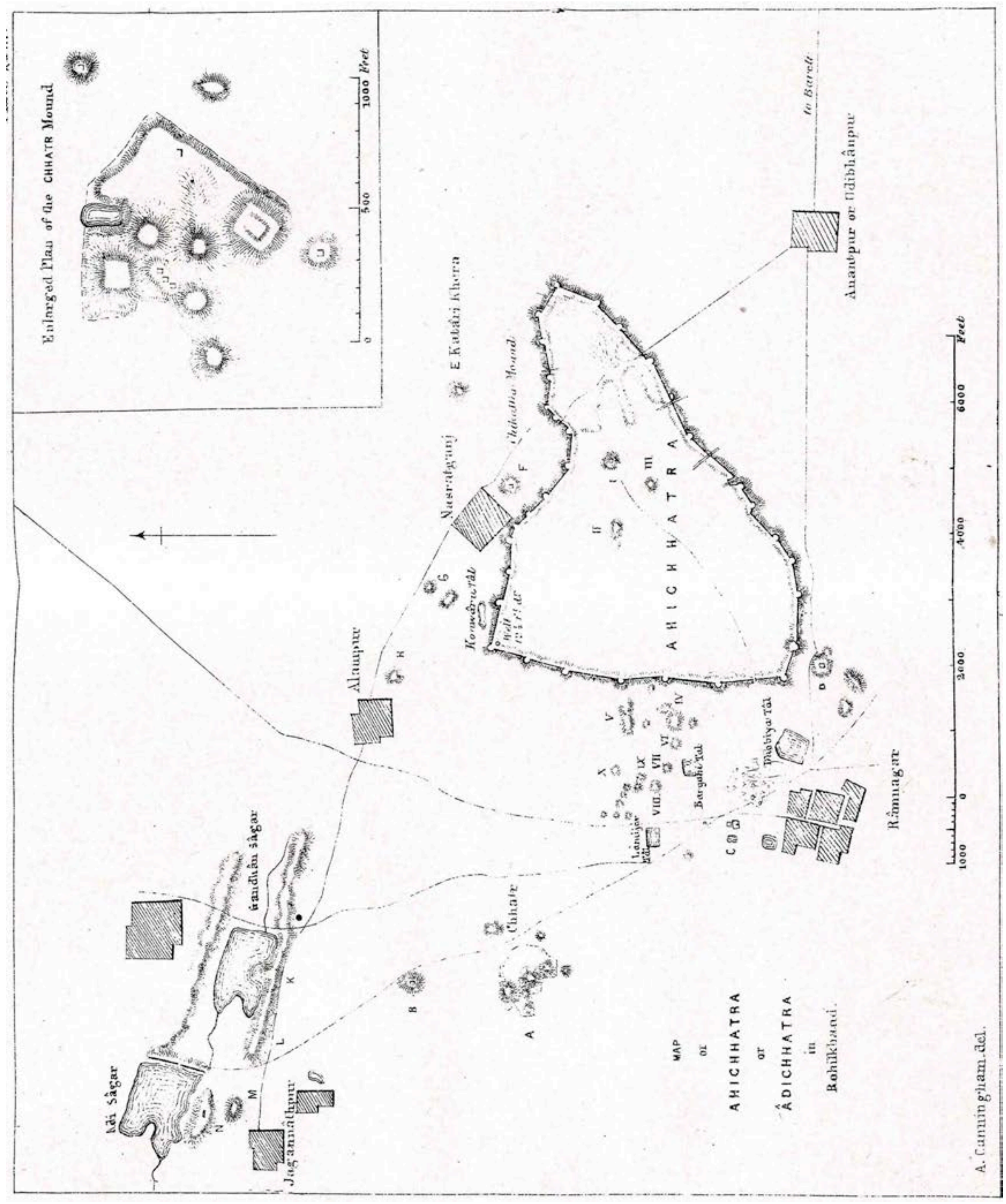
[1] Alexander Cunningham, 'Report of the Archaeological Survey', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 34 (Calcutta: 1866), pp. 177-192 (p. 185).

[2] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 258.

[3] Ibid., p. 258.

[4] Bhuvan Vikrama, 'Archaeology of Panchal with Special Reference to Ahichhatra', in *Abstract of Speakers, International Seminar on "How Deep are the Roots of Indian Civilization? An Archaeological and Historic Perspective"* (New Delhi: Draupadi Trust, 25th-27th November 2010), pp. 23-29 (p. 26). It is claimed that Dr. Alois Führer - a Catholic priest and an amateur archaeologist of a shifty disposition - forged Aśokan and pre-Aśokan Buddhist relics to sell to pilgrims from Burma and Thailand for personal financial gain. See (eds.) Geoffrey Scarre & Robin Coningham, *Appropriating the Past: Philosophical Perspectives on the Practice of Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 287.

only 400 m to the east.[5] In 1888, Sadaruddin, Zamindar of Rampur also conducted some minor excavations, but again these are not recorded.[6]



6.1. Cunningham's plan of Ahichhatrā.[7]

Excavations were carried out at Ahichhatrā over four seasons between 1940 and 1944 under the direction of Rao Bahadur K. N. Dikshit and with the assistance of A.

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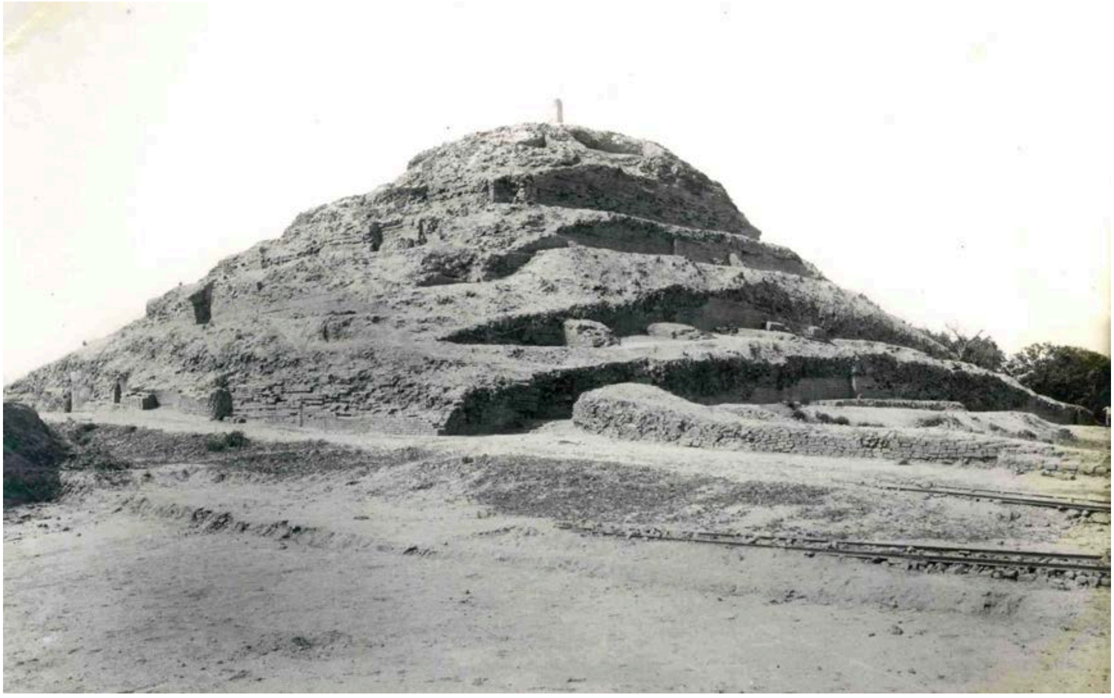
[5] Vikrama, 'The Forgotten Giant', p. 7

[6] Vikrama, 'Archaeology', p. 26.

[7] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, Plate XLIII.

Ghosh, K. N. Puri, K. C. Panigrahi, Krishna Deva, C. C. Das Gupta, and S. S. Mukherjee.[8] Ten plots situated both inside and outside of the fortress were delineated, each measuring 152 metres square, and in total covering an area of 1524 metres square. These plots, numbered ACI, ACII, ACIII, ACIV etc., mostly following Cunningham's designations, were either fully or partially excavated.[9]



6.2. ACI from the northeast with rail tracks in the foreground. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

To emphasise how ambitious and large-scale these excavations were, we might draw attention to the rail carts bought from Germany to Ahichhatrā for the purpose of moving vast quantities of soil and debris. Photographs show the tracks running behind ACI, and it is conceivable that the top layers of soil, which may have been littered with fragments from the fallen temple, would have been carted away (Fig. 6.2). Even today the carts and rail tracks lie in an abandoned state at the site (Fig. 6.3). The cultural sequence established during these excavations is outlined in Table 6.1.[10]

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[8] Shrimali, *History of Pancala*, p. 2.
[9] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 1.
[10] Ghosh and Panigrahi, p. 40.

6.3. Rail tracks piled up in front of the campsite at Ahichhatrā.

Table 6.1. Cultural sequence at Ahichhatrā established during the 1940-44 excavations.

Stratum	Date
IX	Prior to 300 BCE
VIII	300-200 BCE
VII	200-100 BCE
VI and V	100 BCE - 100 CE
IV	100-350 CE
III	350-750 CE
II	750-850 CE
I	850-1100 CE

Between 1963 and 1965, N. R. Banerjee conducted two seasons of excavation work with the intention of outlining a cultural sequence at Ahichhatrā.[11] Between 2007 and 2011, Bhuvan Vikrama and his team carried out excavations at the site using GIS and

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[11] Vikrama, ‘Archaeology’, p. 27.

GPR, alongside traditional methods of archaeology.[12] The team opened more than 34 trenches, discovering structures and artefacts dating from the 3rd century BCE to the tenth or eleventh centuries CE.[13] Vikrama has also outlined a cultural sequence (Table 6.2).[14]

Table 6.2. Cultural sequence at Ahichhatrā established during the 2007-2011 excavations.

Period	Date
I	Ochre Coloured Pottery (OCP)
II	Pre-painted Grey Ware (PGW) Deposit of Black and Red Ware
III	PGW
IV	Northern Black Polished Ware (NBP)
V	Mitra-Pañcāla Period: 200 BCE-300 CE
VI	Gupta Period: 300-550 CE
VII	Post-Gupta/Rajput Period: 550-850 CE
VIII	Early Medieval Period: 850-1200 CE

Location

Turning now to the ancient site: Ahichhatrā lies in a strategic position in the fertile plains approximately eighty kilometres south of the foothills of the Himalayas (coordinates: 28°22’00 N 79°07’39 E). Cunningham writes:

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[12] Ibid., p. 27.

[13] Ibid., p. 27.

[14] Bhuvan Vikrama, ‘Fresh Excavation at Ahichhatra’, in *Archaeology of India from its Beginnings to 2013 Book II*, ed. by Amar Nath Khanna (Delhi: Swati Publications, 2014), pp. 68-71 (p. 69).

> The fort is situated between the *Rām Ganga* and *Gāngam Rivers*, which are both difficult to cross; the former on account of its broad sands, the latter on account of its extensive ravines. Both on the north and east the place is rendered almost inaccessible by the *Piria Nala*, a difficult ravine with steep broken banks, and numerous deep pools of water quite impassable by wheeled vehicles… Indeed the only accessible side of the position is the northwest… It therefore fully merits the description of Hwen Thsang as being defended by "natural obstacles."[15]

To stress the inaccessibility of this location, Cunningham recalls how it was in the jungles close to Aonla, a few kilometres from Ahichhatrā, that the Katheria Rajputs bravely 'withstood the Muhammadans under Firuz Tughlak.'[16]

Ramparts

The fortress walls form an irregular isosceles triangle (see Fig. 6.1), with the west wall measuring around 1707 m in length, the north wall 1951 m, and the southeast wall 2255.5 m. The diameter of the wall is 5.6 km,[17] and the site spans an area of over 187 hectares.[18] The fortifications are formed from densely piled mud and bricks (Figs. 6.4 and 6.5) with bastions, or towers, spaced at intervals along the fortress walls. Cunningham records that Captain Hodgson found thirty-four bastions, while he was only able to detect thirty-two. He notes though, that areas of the wall were so overgrown with jungle that some may have been hidden from view.[19] These bastions have since suffered severe erosion and may have been further damaged owing to being a bountiful illicit source of yellow mud for house construction.[20] Recent work carried out at the site using Geoinformatics techniques found only eighteen bastions.[21]

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[15] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 257.

[16] Ibid., p. 257.

[17] Ibid., p. 256.

[18] Vikrama, 'Archaeology of Panchal', p. 301.

[19] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 257.

[20] Archaeologist Anup Mishra highlights the multiple problems facing the site of Ahichhatrā, including erosion and theft. See Anup Mishra, 'Save Ancient Indian Sites – Ahichhatra: At the Mercy of Vandalism', <http://saveancientindiansites.blogspot.co.uk/2011/09/2.html>

[21] See Amit Tare, Onkar Dikshit, G. K. Rai, R. S. Fonia, V. N. Prabhakar and Bhuvan Vikram, 'Preliminary Investigations for Ahicchatra Using Geoinformatics Techniques', *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in History and Archaeology*, 2 (2005), pp. 287-299 (p. 295).

6.4. An area of the heavily eroded ramparts to the west, viewed from the agricultural fields outside of the ancient city.

6.5. Eroded ramparts and mounds on the northwest corner of the fortress.

A number of the bastions recorded by Cunningham were strengthened and enlarged in the early to mid-eighteenth century by the Nawab Ali Mohammed Khan (1706-1748), adopted son of the Pashtun founder of Rohilkhand (northwest Uttar Pradesh), Daud Khan.[22] His intention was to restore the fortress in order to defend himself against the Delhi Sultanate if need be.[23] According to anecdotal tradition, the Nawab spent a crore (ten million rupees) on this project, but was compelled to abandon it owing to escalating costs.[24] Cunningham found an arched gateway constructed from reused bricks in the southeast wall of the fort, which was probably built during this time.[25] The ruined monuments may have suffered further damage during the Nawab's stay at the site; if not through iconoclasm, then at least by relocating bricks for the repair of the bastions. Between 1940 and 1944 the walls of the fortress were explored at a couple of points. Two earlier earthen ramparts were discovered beneath the visible brick wall.[26] At the level of the earliest rampart, an abundance of grey pottery was found, which Ghosh and Panigrahi date to between *circa* 300 BCE and 100 BCE:

> Its existence in the core of the rampart is doubtless to be explained by the heaping up of mixed material brought from different places, and the absence of distinctive later pottery from the group suggests that the earlier rampart, the first fortification round the city, was erected not much later than B.C. 100, in which case it might be connected with the advent of the Pañchāla rulers known to us from their coins dating from the first century B.C.[27]

Pañcāla was located in a strategic position and controlled important trade routes in northern India.[28] Thus, in Shrimali's view, the repeated construction of the ramparts at Ahichhatrā is indicative of the constant threat the ancient city faced from invaders coming from the west. He further comments that, 'this explanation is confirmed by the fact that the fortifications at Ahicchatra are more in the nature of ramparts than embankments.'[29] Recent investigations suggest that the fortifications were constructed in the Northern Black Polished ware period (NBP), which loosely dates from *circa* 700 BCE to 200 CE, so the original ramparts may be considerably earlier than has been suggested by Ghosh, or indeed Banerjee, who dates their earliest phase to the

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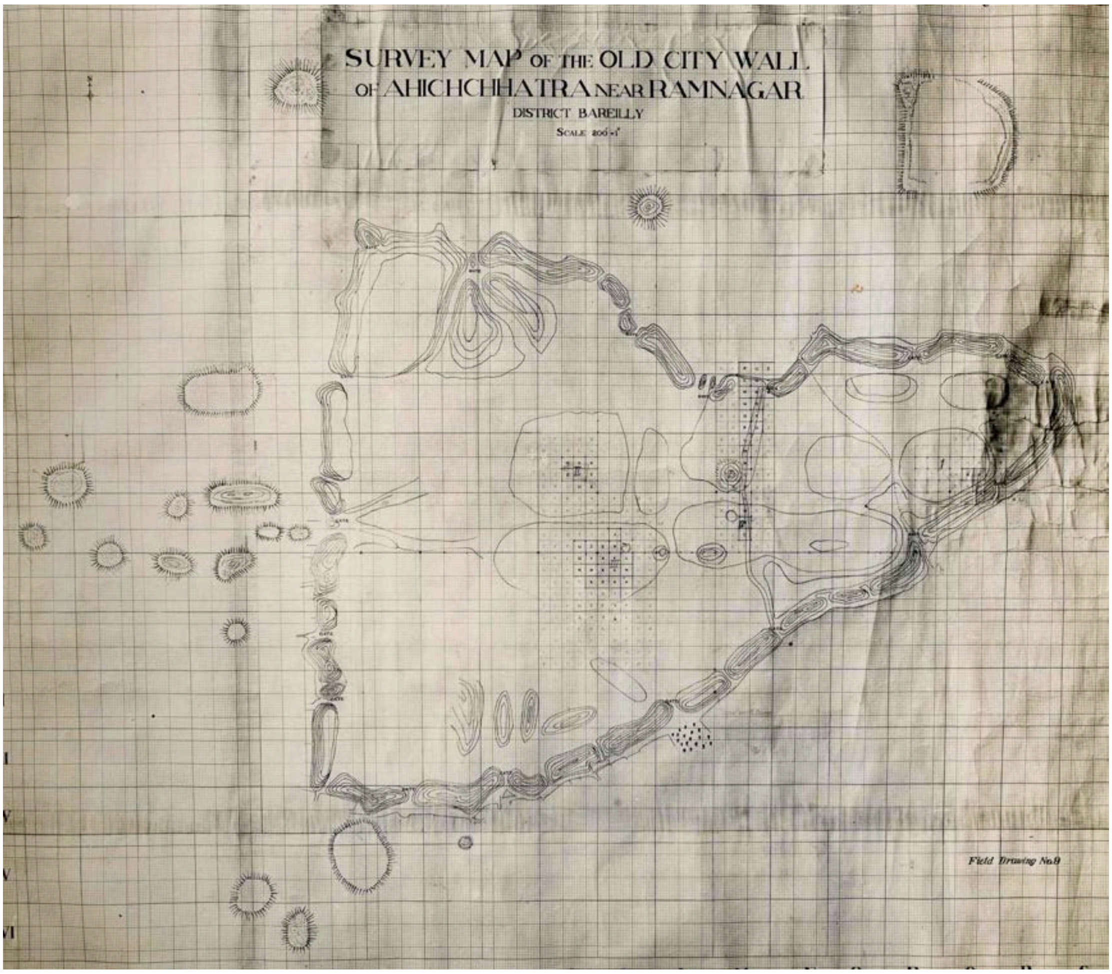
[22] See *Indian States, A Biographical, Historical, and Administrative Survey*, ed. by Arnold Wright (New Delhi: Asian Education Services, 2006, 1st edn 1922), pp. 357-360.
[23] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 257.
[24] Ibid., p. 257. Cunningham believes these costs to be highly exaggerated.
[25] Ibid., p. 258.
[26] Ghosh and Panigrahi, p. 38.
[27] Ibid., p. 38.
[28] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 144.
[29] Ibid., p. 144.

Kuṣāṇa period.[30] As Vikrama notes though, it has not yet been clarified whether the entire fortification was constructed in the NBP period, or whether the settlement was in fact smaller at that time.[31] The several gateways piercing the walls of the fortress are illustrated on an ASI plan from the 1940s (Fig. 6.6).[32]



6.6. Plan of the fortress walls at Ahichhatrā. Many of the gaps in the walls indicate the original gateways to the city with the main entrance being at the centre of the west wall. A cluster of temple mounds flank the main entrance. The areas of the city that were excavated during the 1940s are marked on the grid. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological survey of India, 1940-44.

Water Sources at Ahichhatrā

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[30] N. R. Banerjee, 'Excavation at Ahichchhatra, District Bareilly', in *Indian Archaeology 1963-64 - A Review*, ed. by A. Ghosh (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1967), pp. 43-44 (p. 44).

[31] Vikrama, 'Archaeology', p. 27.

[32] Using satellite imagery Vikrama found nine gateways, six of them major entrances to the city. See Vikrama, 'Archaeology of Panchal', p. 303. Unfortunately, from Fig. 6.6 it is not possible to establish which openings in the ramparts represent the original gateways to the city and which have been formed in more recent times.

The land stretching from the west wall up to the pyramidal Śiva temple is deeply contoured with steep mounds and hillocks and is densely littered with brickbats and potsherds (Fig. 6.7). Although no one inhabits the site, cattle are brought to graze here daily, accelerating its destruction. The land to the rear of the Śiva temple is on a lower elevation and is used for agricultural purposes, such as for growing dal.[33] The land within the fortress is elevated, rising to a maximum height of 22.86 m above the agricultural land outside of the city walls.[34]

6.7. Baked brick fragments in the fortress of Ahichhatrā.

Despite being situated between the Rāmganga and Ganges rivers and other tributaries, there is at present no perennial water source at Ahichhatrā.[35] Following recent scientific investigations, however, it was concluded that there was in the past most probably a water body in an area of low elevation to the north of the city.[36] Satellite images show a long winding riverbed running past the north and east sides of the fortress, located only 539 m from the fortress wall at its closest point. This may be the Periya rivulet mentioned by Shrimali.[37] The low-lying area of the fortress to the east appears to have suffered from a natural disaster – most probably flooding – since it was entirely abandoned and a substantial barrier was built dividing the lower levels

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[33] According to photographic records this land does not appear to have been used for agricultural purposes in the 1940s.
[34] Ghosh and Panigrahi, p. 37.
[35] Vikrama, 'Archaeology of Panchal', p. 301.
[36] Tare, Dikshit, Rai, Fonia, Prabhakar and Vikram, pp. 287-299.
[37] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 144.

from the higher levels.[38] The barrier or partition wall is 2.7 m wide and approximately 2.4 m in height.[39] The wall is still clearly demarcated and now functions as a path, which runs directly behind the east face of the pyramidal Śiva temple (ACI) (Fig. 6.8).

6.8. The barrier runs across the fortress from north to south directly behind ACI, pictured at the centre of the satellite image.

This barrier may in part explain why the staircases on the east of the structure are better preserved than those on the west, since they may have ceased to be used (regularly at least) from quite early on. Moreover, steps leading from ground level to the first platform on the east side have not been found. As Vikrama suggests, these could have been obliterated when the partition wall was constructed.[40] It also suggests that the barrier would not have been built until some time after the Śiva temple was constructed, and indeed, Vikrama notes that this part of the settlement was cordoned off in the post-Gupta period.[41] If the riverbed visible on satellite images was in existence during the first few centuries CE, it is quite conceivable that low-lying areas

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[38] Tare, Dikshit, Rai, Fonia, Prabhakar and Vikram, pp. 295-296.

[39] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 144.

[40] Vikrama, 'The Forgotten Giant', p. 8.

[41] Vikrama, 'Archaeology', p. 29.

of the city could have been prone to flooding – and trenches opened by Banerjee in the mid-1960s disclosed silty deposits supporting this theory (Fig. 6.9).[42]

6.9. The river running to the east of the fortress is marked in blue on the satellite image.

Aside from various wells, Cunningham located several tanks, mostly situated to the west and north of the city walls. One of the largest was *Dhobiya Tāl*, today little more than a muddy ditch that has to be traversed in order to enter into the fortress from the village of Rāmnagar.[43] To the northwest of the fortress are two large tanks known as *Gandhān Sāgar* and *Adi Sāgar*, the latter said to have been constructed by Adi Rājā when, according to legend, he built the fort (Fig. 6.10).[44] Both of these tanks have earthen embankments strengthened with large bricks, and both continue to carry water.[45]

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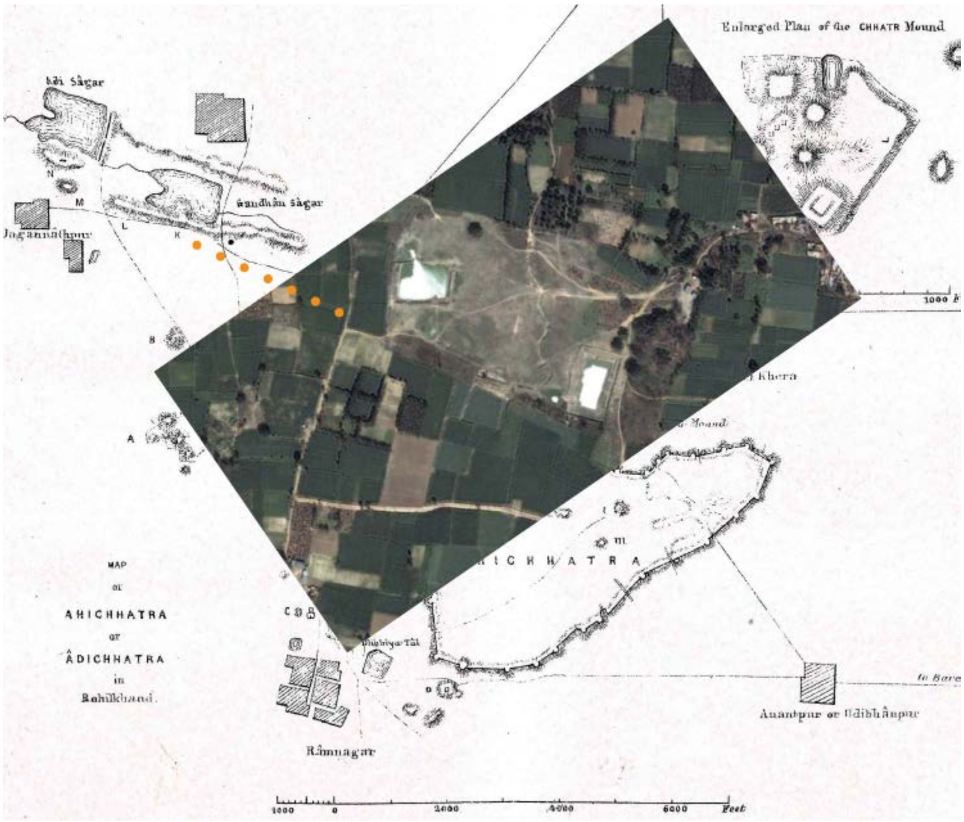
[42] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 144.
[43] Bhuvan Vikrama showed me the tank.
[44] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 258.
[45] Cunningham, 'Report of the Archaeological Survey', p. 180.



6.10. A satellite image of the Gandhān Sāgar and Adi Sāgar tanks superimposed onto Cunningham's map.

Mounds

Cunningham's plan of Ahichhatrā records mounds to the north, west, and southwest of the city walls, measuring from twenty to a thousand feet in diameter (6 m to 305 m) (Fig. 6.11).[46] Remarkably, most of the mounds plotted on Cunningham's map are more or less extant (Figs. 6.12 and 6.13). In addition to this, I have located numerous other mounds using satellite imagery, stretching as far as 8 km from the citadel (Fig. 6.14). These findings tentatively indicate that the area had a relatively large population prior to the abandonment of the city. Lastly, digging on an extensive scale can be seen in a couple of sizeable mounds, exposing the yellow mud beneath. No

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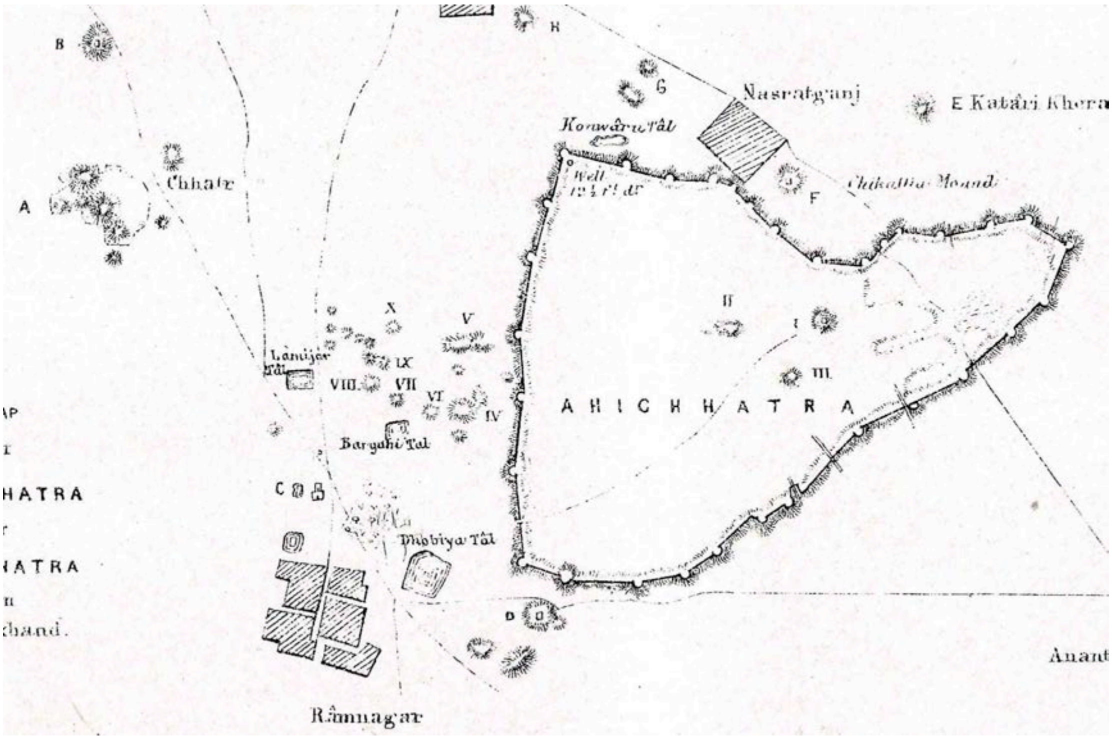
[46] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 258.

doubt any ruins or artefacts that were situated there have been or are being obliterated.[47]

Hindu temples are marked numerically on Cunningham's map, while the Buddhist mounds are marked alphabetically.[48] The former are situated both at the heart of the fortress, and in a cluster to the west outside of the citadel. The Buddhist mounds, on the other hand, form a large arc around the Hindu temples and the fortress.



6.11. A detail of Cunningham's map showing some of the mounds in and around Ahichhatrā.[49]

It is worth mentioning that the sites numbered I, II and III on Cunningham's map form a triangle at the heart of the citadel. In 2012, Ground Penetrating Radar was used at a location equidistant from these three sites; now the location of the ASI campsite.

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[47] The surrounding areas of the ancient city urgently need a thorough survey report to be carried out before some of these mounds are eradicated.

[48] Cunningham, 'Report of the Archaeological Survey', p. 182.

[49] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, Plate XLIII.

The findings indicate that a large-scale residence was situated here. It is too early to say, however, whether this might have been a royal dwelling.[50]

6.12. Mounds directly to the west of the fortress with the village of Rāmnagar in the background.

6.13. Detail of the foundations of a Kuṣāṇa period structure just outside of the west wall of the fortress, recently unearthed by Vikrama and his team.

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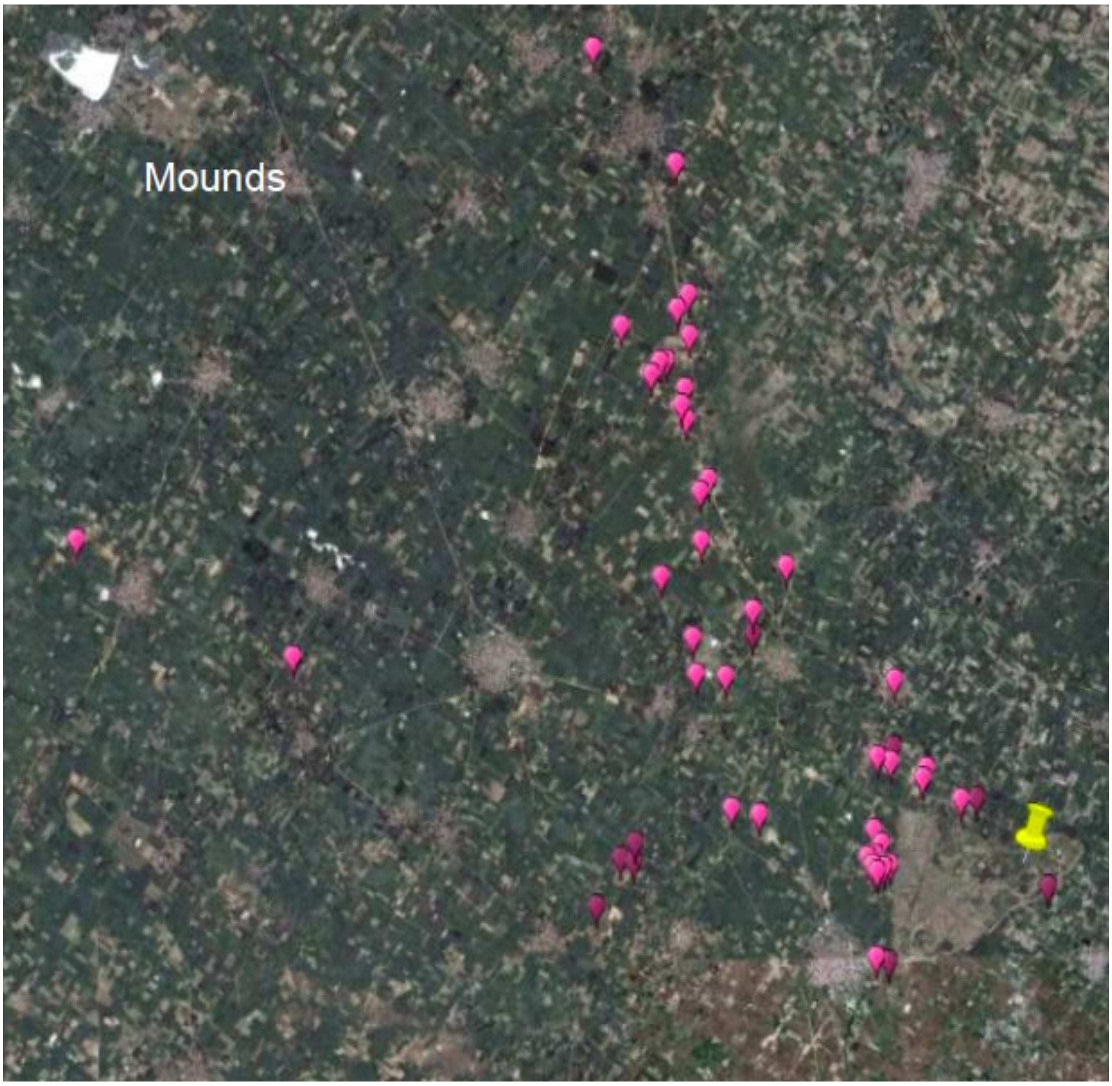
[50] S. Sravanthi, Javed N. Malik and Bhuvan Vikrama, 'Ground Penetrating Radar Investigations at Ahichhatra: An Attempt to Identify Buried Subsurface Structures', in *2012 14th International Conference of Ground Penetrating Radar* (Shanghai: IEEE, 2012), pp. 625-630.



6.14. The location of potential mounds are shown on the satellite image with pink markers. The ancient city of Ahichhatrā is in the lower right hand corner.

Mound ACV

During the Mitra-Pañcāla period the city expanded beyond the walls of the fort. The houses in the new settlement were of a poor quality and findings suggest that craftsmen, including potters and coppersmiths, occupied them.[51] A series of fascinating photographs from the archives of the Archaeological Survey of India show excavation work taking place at the site known as ACV, which is located outside of the fortress wall approximately 1.26 km to the west of the Śiva temple (ACI). The

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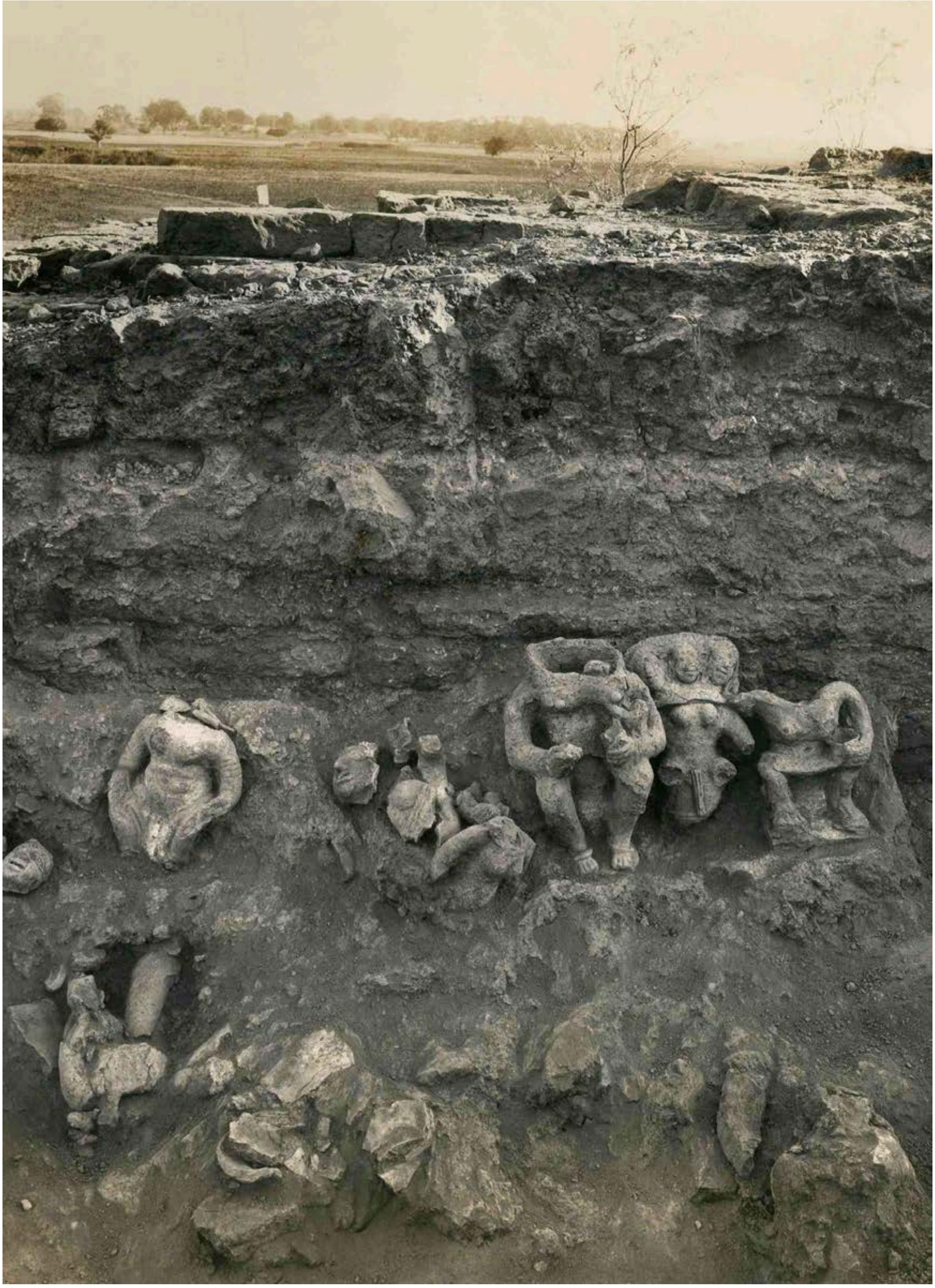
[51] Vikrama, 'Archaeology of Panchal', p. 304.

part-excavated mound was found strewn with forty sizeable sculptural fragments lying on a platform (Figs. 6.15 and 6.16).[52]



6.15. Some of the sculptures unearthed at Ahichhatrā ACV. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological survey of India, 1940-44.

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[52] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 67.

6.16. Excavated platform at Ahichhatrā ACV scattered with numerous terracotta sculptures. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological survey of India, 1940-44.

The bulk of these terracottas represent female divinities, the most common among them being a wide-eyed three-headed goddess.[53] The latter may be representations of Ṣaṣṭhī who is described by Srivanasan as 'an auspicious deity who becomes the guardian of children both during pregnancy and after their birth' (Fig. 6.17).[54] In many of the examples, the two-armed goddess holds a cup in her left hand and an object in the right hand which, Agrawala speculates, might be a mongoose or a purse associated with Kubera.[55] Some of the sculptures show the goddess holding a child.[56] Six sculptures of Mahiṣāsuramardinī were also found on the platform. Agrawala writes: 'It appears that the platform was being used as a shrine of the Mother Goddesses or *Mātṛi-bhāvana*, as it is called by Bāṇabhaṭṭa, where different female tutelary deities worshipped by the village people were installed together at one place.'[57] Agrawala dates the terracotta sculptures to the post-Gupta period.[58] Many of the figures captured in the photographs are seated in an upright position with their legs slightly apart and their hands resting on their thighs. This is a posture employed

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[53] Interestingly, a terracotta figurine depicting a three-headed female from Fareedpur, District Bareilly, is on display at the State Museum, Allahabad. It has been dated to circa the third century CE and emphasises that this deity, whether she represents Ṣaṣṭhī or a local goddess, was popular in the region.
[54] Srinivasan, p. 333.
[55] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 67.
[56] Ibid., p. 67.
[57] Ibid., p. 68.
[58] Ibid., p. 68.

frequently in the figurative art of the Kuṣāṇas and thus the possibility exists that these sculptures are considerably earlier than estimated by Agrawala.[59]

6.17. Three-headed terracotta figurines from Ahichhatrā ACV. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological survey of India, 1940-44.

Incidentally, the location of this platform just outside of the fortress walls might be indicative of a lesser status – possibly being a place of worship for people belonging to specific non-elite castes, including the craftsmen mentioned above. The terracottas found here have a definite 'folk' quality about them in contrast to the earthy yet elegant relief sculptures of Gangā and Yamunā found on the pyramidal Śiva monument situated at the heart of the citadel. It might be imagined that less affluent families would make offerings to the goddesses at this shrine, or even commission images to give thanks for good fortune, or to ask for an abundant harvest, or in the hope of a cure for disease, infertility, and so forth.

Mound IV

Mound IV is located approximately 304 m away from the west gate of the fort. Two smaller mounds were situated on its northeast corner.[60] Cunningham excavated the

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[59] See, for example, a Kuṣāṇa period terracotta sculpture of the goddess Hariti depicted seated. The sculpture is housed in the Allahabad University Museum and is reproduced in *From Indian Earth, 4,000 Years of Terracotta Art*, ed. by Amy G. Poster (The Brooklyn Museum: New York, 1986), p. 123.

surface and discovered the foundations of a temple with a sanctum measuring 3.35 m internally with walls a metre in depth. The sanctum contained a platform for sculptures.[61] Amongst his findings was a terracotta seated three-eyed Śiva with four arms, one hand holding a lotus flower. The sculpture measured almost 31 cm in height.[62] Other findings included a red sandstone hand holding a conch on a large scale. Rather than being dedicated to Viṣṇu, however, Cunningham writes that there was 'a projecting portion of the pedestal' which he believes would have held a *liṅga*, making this a Śiva temple.[63] Unfortunately, the evidence is too scant to substantiate this. As usual, Cunningham has made no attempt to date this temple. Interestingly, though, he describes how he found piles of ashes inside the structure, leading him to infer that the temple may have been destroyed by Muslim forces during one of their campaigns against the Katehria Rajputs.[64]

Mound ACIV

In the early 1940s, ACIV, a medium-sized mound located a short distance south of ACI – not to be confused with Cunningham's mound IV – was fully excavated (Fig. 6.18). Based on the sole post-excavation photograph, it appears to have been a solid brick structure at the heart of the compound, possibly built on a cellular plan (Fig. 6.19). This may be the ruin of a substantial plinth. Agrawala reports a few sculptures from ACIV in his catalogue including three Viṣṇu images or fragments from Viṣṇu sculptures, [65] two images of Gaṇeśa,[66] a votive tank with a bird perched on a rim,[67] and a number of miscellaneous figurines. He has not attempted to date any of the sculptural finds from ACIV; however, it was in this mound that the Gupta clay seal mentioned in Chapter 5 bearing the legend, *śrī-Ahichchhatrā-bhuktau kumārāmātyāyādhikarṇasya* (of the office of the Kumārāmātyāin the division of Ahichhatrā) was found: thus, the temple was probably in use during this period.[68]

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[60] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 259.
[61] Ibid., p. 260.
[62] Ibid., p. 260.
[63] Ibid., p. 260.
[64] Ibid., p. 260.
[65] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 23.
[66] Ibid., p. 28.
[67] Ibid., p. 22.
[68] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines,* p. 1ff.

6.18. ACIV viewed from ACI.

6.19. ACIV from the southeast following excavation. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1941-2.

Mound ACIII

Cunningham plotted site III (ACIII) on his map but was unable to explore the mound since it was overgrown with 'scrub jungle.'[69] The mound was eventually excavated in the early 1940s (Figs. 6.20, 6.21 and 6.22). Indeed, it was only at ACIII that excavations began from a level high enough to determine whether the plot had been occupied until the demise of the city, which it had been.[70]

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[69] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 259.

[70] Ghosh and Panigrahi, p. 38.

6.20. ACIII following excavation. Photograph Courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

Moreover, the archaeologists exposed a cross section of the structural levels, which was then used to formulate a rather tentative stratigraphy that was applied to all findings site-wide, and especially for the purpose of understanding the development of pottery types.'[71] Interestingly, Ghosh and Panigrahi write that:

> Ahichchhatra, if the excavated remains in AC III may be regarded as typical of the whole city, has not produced that feature which is found in many other stratified sites in India, *viz*. a well-planned city continuing practically unchanged through the ages. Here each stratum had its own plan and alignment of houses radically different from the next earlier or later stratum.[72]

However, Banerjee, who excavated the northwest corner of a mound close to ACV, writes: 'Burnt bricks in mud-mortar were freely employed in the construction of houses, which followed the same cardinal alignment throughout the successive levels.'[73] These conflicting results demonstrate how little is really understood of the ancient city as a whole, since only a small fraction of it has been excavated and little has been reported.

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[71] Ibid., p. 39.
[72] Ibid., p. 39.
[73] Banerjee, p. 44.

6.21. Site ACIII with ACI in the distance.

Nine strata were identified at ACIII, some with signs of more than one period of construction. They were largely dated on the basis of coins.[74] The first brick structures were found at stratum VI (100 BCE-100 CE).[75] Stratum III, which is believed to span from *circa* 350 to 750 CE, had up to four stages of construction.[76] The earlier date of this stratum is founded on the discovery of numerous Nāga coins from the reign of Achyuta who was defeated in battle by Samudragupta.[77] Both the considerable length of this stratum and its several stages of construction have contributed to the vagueness of the dating of both the terracotta sculptures and structural ruins from the Gupta and post-Gupta periods. Of the four stages in this stratum, the second (*c*) contained the foundations of a substantial apsidal temple compound; this can be comfortably dated to the Gupta period. In the third stage (*b*), a temple with three shrines and additional buildings was constructed.[78] The ruins belonging to stratum III are outlined in an ASI plan (Fig. 6.23).

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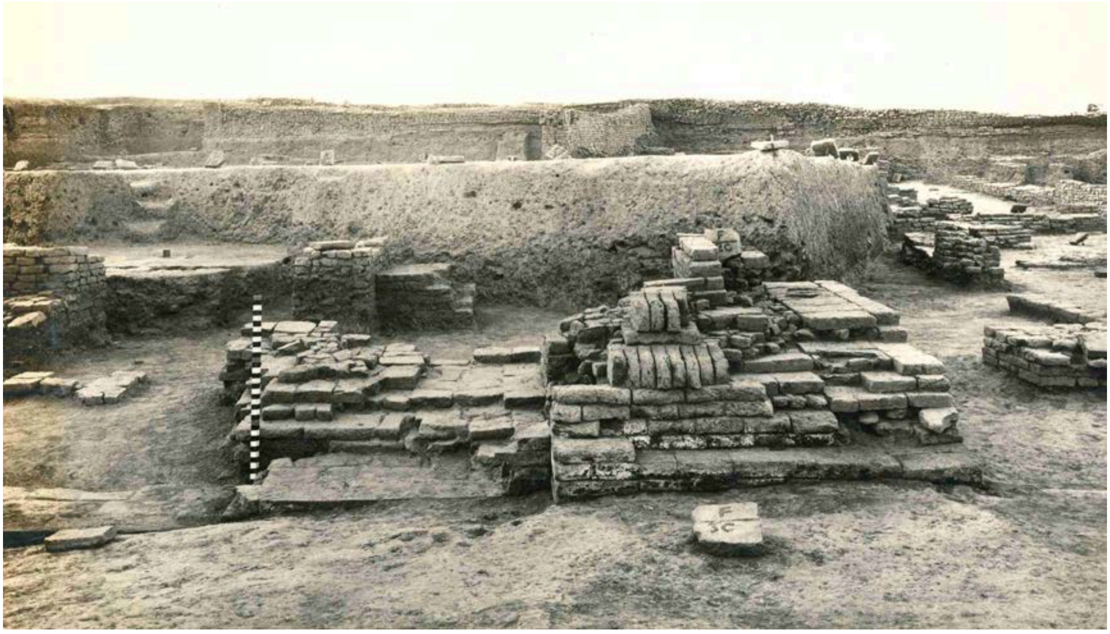
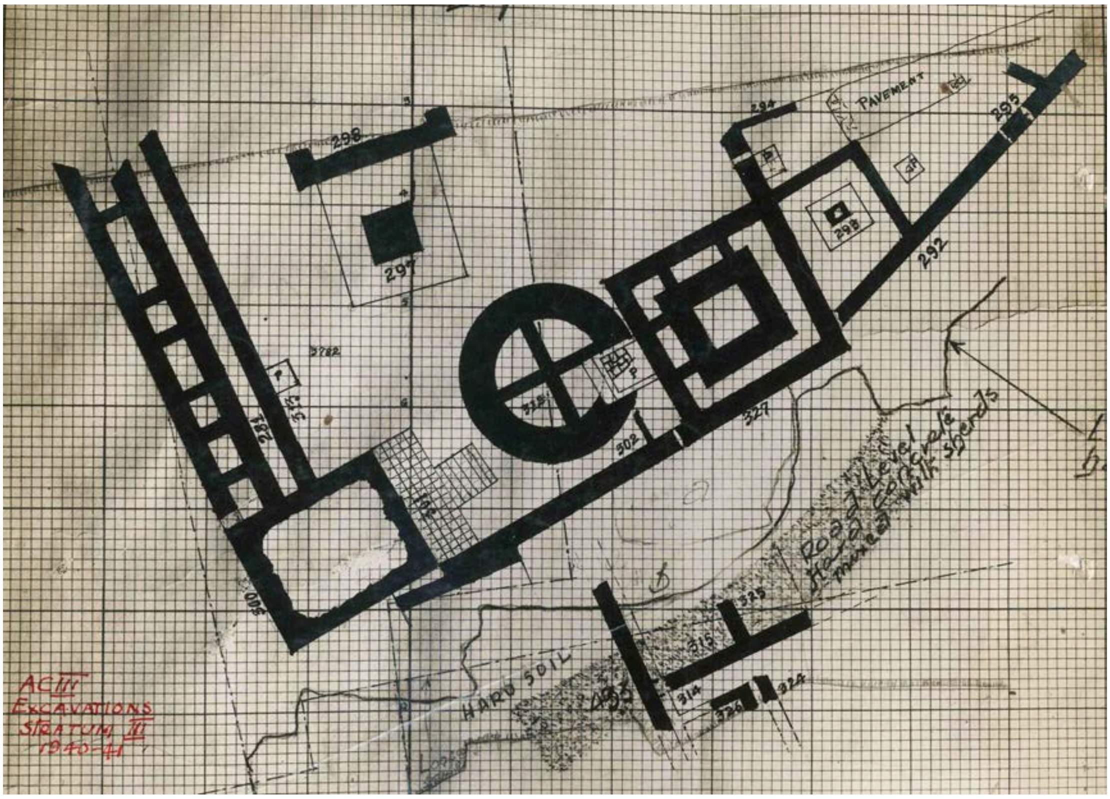
[74] Ghosh and Panigrahi, p. 39.
[75] Ibid., p. 39.
[76] Ibid., p. 39.
[77] Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, p. 13.
[78] Ghosh and Panigrahi, p. 39.



6.22. *Ruins of a shrine with moulded steps in stratum III site ACIII. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.*



6.23. *Plan depicting stratum III (c. 350-750 CE) of ACIII. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.*

Towards the southeast of the plot is the base of a circular structure with four spokes measuring 5.3 m in diameter (Fig. 6.24).[79] Its original form and function are not known. Hundreds of terracotta figurines were found at ACIII, most of which were of a Hindu affiliation. The Mātṛkās featured prominently here during the Gupta and post-Gupta periods, as did deities such as Sūrya. Some of these sculptures will be explored in Chapter 11.

6.24. Base of a circular spoked structure in ACIII.

Mound ACII

Cunningham describes mound II (ACII) as being 35 feet (10.6 metres) in height, enveloping a large square structure with a long flight of steps to the west (Fig. 6.29). We learn little more of this temple except that he was confident that it was Hindu.[80] As Agrawala informs us, a beautiful moulded terracotta head of Śiva (6.6 cm in height) was found in the north wall of the monument, and a second head of Śiva on the same diminutive scale was also found at ACII.[81] These small findings, along with Cunningham's assertion that only one of the Hindu temples at the site had a non-

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[79] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 150.
[80] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 259.
[81] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 28. See Plate XIII (No. 115).

Śaiva affiliation,[82] would very tentatively suggest that like ACI, ACII might have been dedicated to Śiva. Of interest is a brief account of the temples ACI and ACII, given in an issue of *Rupam* (1922):

> The ruins of two brick temples at Rampur, District Bareli, now identified with ancient Ahichhatra, are believed to be very old and one is supposed to date from the 1st century as a number of coins of the so-called Mitra kings were discovered in one of them. The spires of these temples were not apparently of the *shikhara* form. Dr. Führer believed 'that the highest mound', 'a lingam temple' 'rose up in tiers' and that the other a large two-storied Shaiva temple of carved brick 'had its first terrace surrounded by 9 cells and the 2nd by 7 cells'- thus hardly allowing any room for a superimposed *shikhara*.[83]

Thus, if we are to take Führer's word for it, ACII was indeed a Śiva monument. Incidentally, Cunningham records finding a colossal *liṅga* near the village of Gulariya around four kilometres to the north of the citadel.[84] It is worth tentatively positing the suggestion that this *liṅga* might have originated from ACII.

A plan of this monument drawn up during the 1940-44 excavations is preserved in an ASI photograph (Figs. 6.25 and 6.26). The structure is around 11.6 m in height, and square in shape (Figs. 6.27 and 6.28). It is built on a cellular plan rendering it entirely solid. The elevation reveals that the monument originally had four terraces, the uppermost bearing the shrine, and a large central projection on the west. The temple was approached via stairs on the north and south sides of this projection. A single (and now only partially extant) staircase with a number of landings, then led up the pyramidal monument along the east-west axis.

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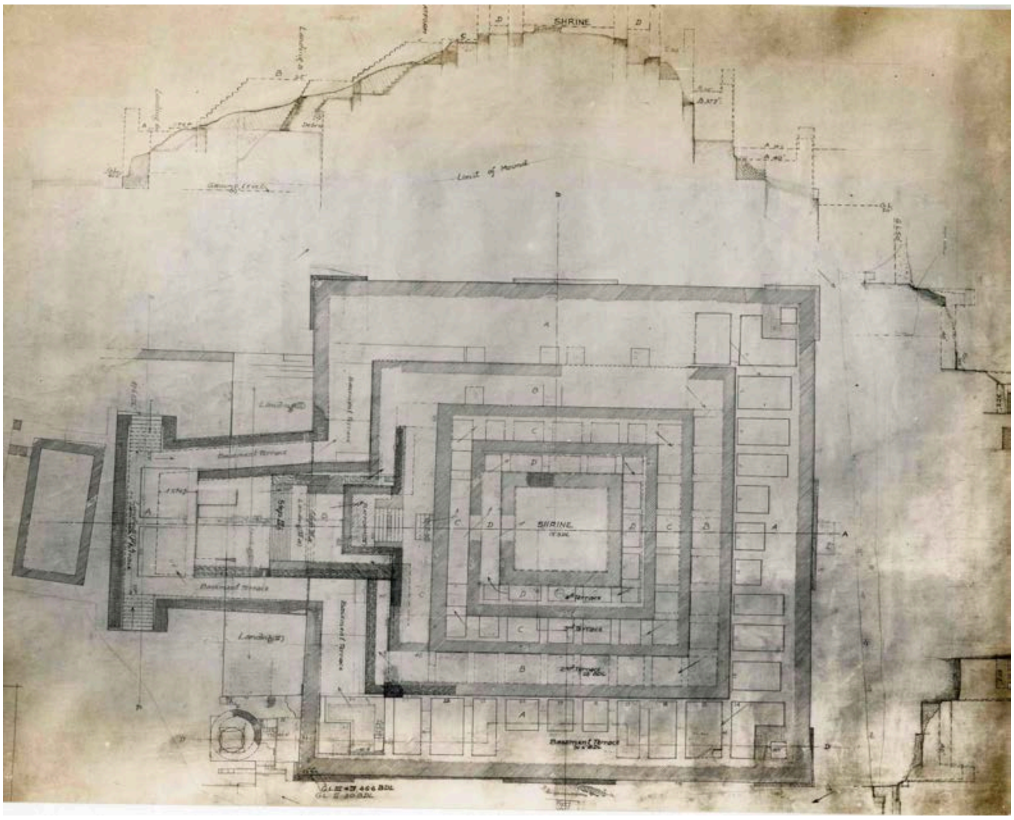
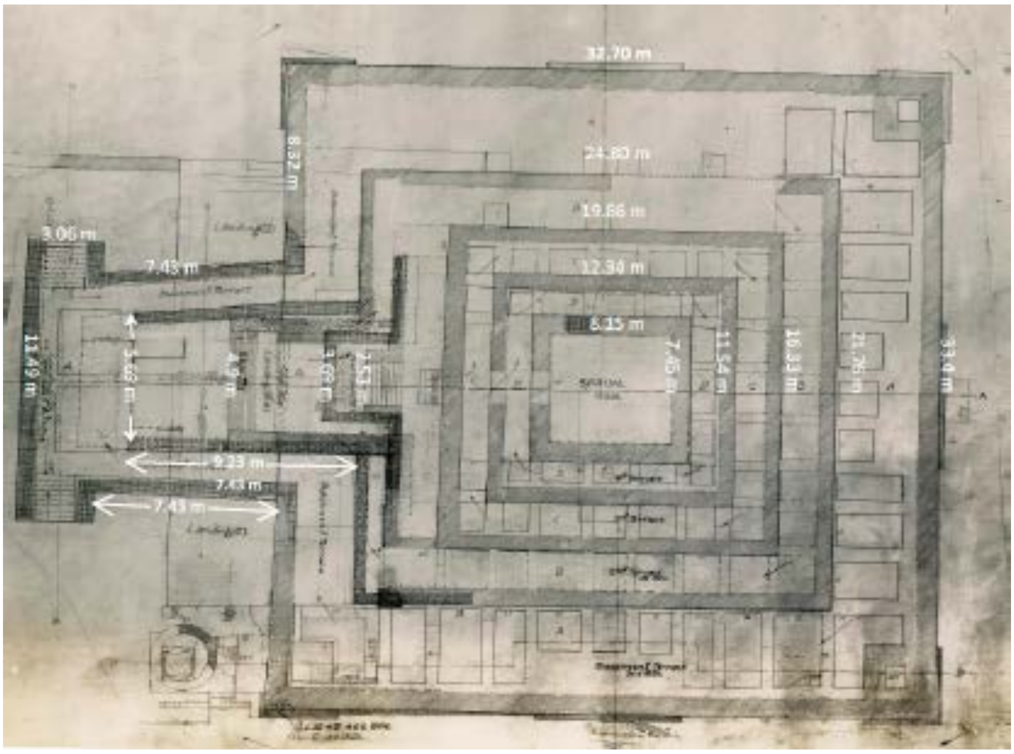
[82] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 265.

[83] Gurudas Sarkar, 'Notes on the History of Shikhara Temples', *Rupam,* 10, ed. by Ordhendra Coomar Gangoly (Calcutta: Indian Society of Oriental Art, April 1922), pp. 42-57 (pp. 44-45). As explored in Chapter 5, the Mitra kings in actuality ruled from around the 1st century BCE up until the ancient city was annexed by the Guptas. It is regrettable that Sarkar has not mentioned in which mound the Mitra coins were discovered. If they were found in ACII, then this would tentatively support my argument in Chapter 11 for an early Gupta, or possibly even marginally pre-Gupta date for the structure.

[84] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 265.



6.25. Plan and elevation of the ACII monument. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.



6.26. ASI plan of ACII with measurements superimposed.

The basement terrace is ornamented with shallow projections on each of the corners and at the centre of each wall on the north, south and east faces (Figs. 6.29 and 6.30). Ellen Raven points out, 'the *Pañcāyatana* plan … must be a later upgrading to a new temple mode.'[85] The base platform measures between 32 and 33 m on each side. The terrace labelled as D on the 1940s plan is approximately 11 m in length on each side, while the shrine terrace measures 7.45 m in the north south direction and 8.15 m east west.[86] Mud mortar was employed in the original construction of the monument, but for conservation purposes lime concrete has been used.[87]

6.27. The west face of ACII.

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[85] Raven, p. 6. Raven notes here that ACII was not fully excavated. Aside, however, from the central shaft, the monument was in fact fully excavated in contrast to ACI.

[86] The upper terrace is likely to be the base of the shrine rather than a terrace for a shrine. The measurements are remarkably close to the base of the temple on ACI as will be explored shortly. This tentatively suggests that similar temples may have crowned both monuments.

[87] Bhuvan Vikrama, Personal Communication.

6.28. *ACII from the east.*

6.29. *A corner of ACII.*

6.30. Image shows part of the restored base of ACII.

Ghosh writes about the pyramidal temples in a letter to Kramrisch:

> In all their stages … they [ACI and ACII] are square in plan with projections in the west for flights of steps. The fully exposed temple [ACII] has three storeys in its last three stages. The first and earliest stage being buried very deep below the later superstructures was imperfectly explored. The plan of each single storey is square. There is no shrine on each storey, the only one being on the top. Each terrace leaves a sufficient space between the central part and the parapet for serving as ambulatory. The axis of the temples consists of a hollow central shaft, filled with debris, on the top of which the sanctuary was erected. In neither case has the central shaft been exposed to the lowest depth. In one case it was dug down to 12 feet from the top. The earliest stage of the temples evidently belongs to the Gupta period, as one of them was founded on a level yielding typical pottery of the Kuṣāṇa period … They continue in their last stages till the end of the tenth or eleventh century.[88]

The elevation drawing reveals that the monument was enlarged at some point, with the western projection being expanded considerably. Indeed, Ghosh informs us that: 'Both the temples [ACI and ACII] underwent several repairs and restorations, resulting in horizontal and vertical increases in their dimensions.'[89] The current projection then, cannot be considered Gupta in design, although it is not entirely clear

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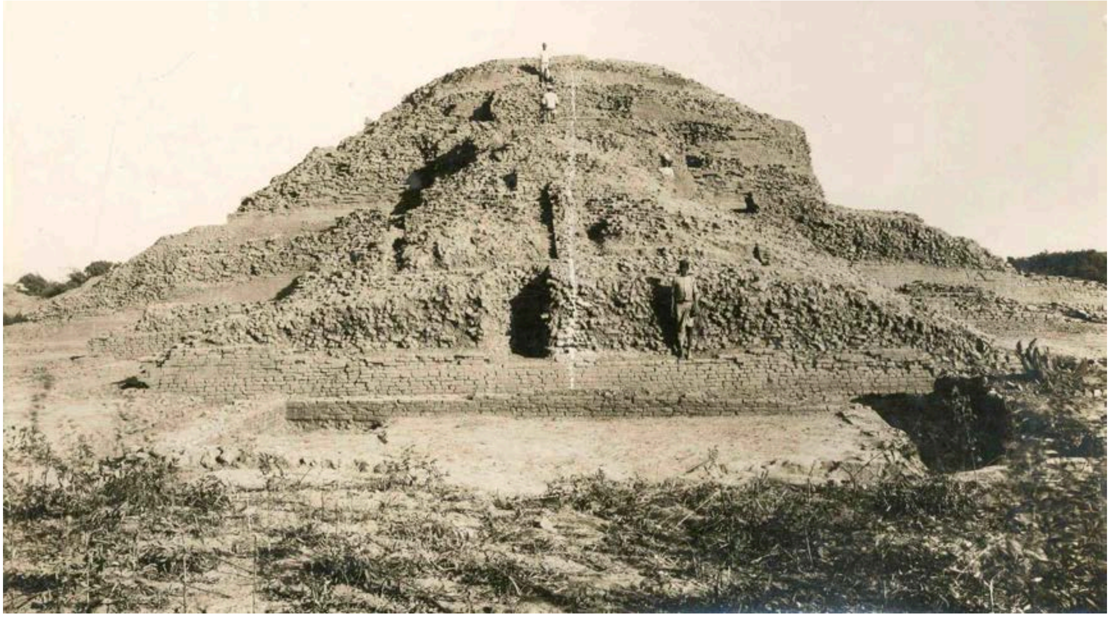
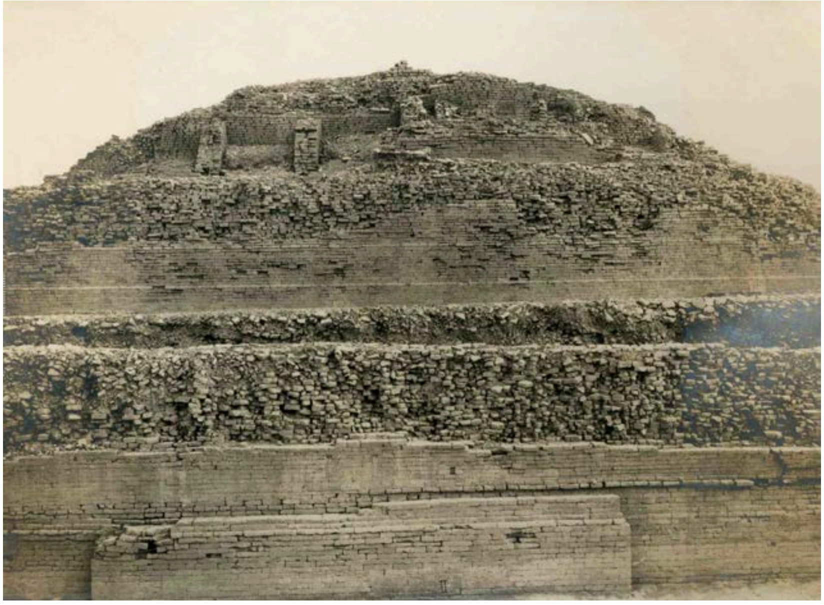
[88] Cited in Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple I*, p. 174.
[89] Ibid., p. 174.

how far the extension differed from the original form. The elevation drawing also shows that instead of the open platforms we see today, the outer walls of the terraces were high, forming corridors, as at the later Buddhist monument of Borobudur in Java. Along the basement terrace on the north side, a series of shallow platforms were discovered. Their original purpose, however, is not apparent.

Several ornate Gupta period moulded terracotta bricks were found here, many of them pilaster fragments. These are considerably more artistic than those found at the neighbouring ACI monument. They will be explored in more detail in Chapter 7. As the post-excavation photographs demonstrate, this temple was unearthed in an even poorer condition than ACI, perhaps because it had already been subjected to earlier excavations at the hands of Führer, Cunningham and probably others. The outer facing of the monument was found in a severely damaged state and so we are afforded little idea of how the brickwork would have looked originally (Figs. 6.31 and 6.32). The ornamental bricks unearthed at ACII suggest that the monument was adorned with superb pilasters and friezes, perhaps in a fairly similar arrangement to the temple at Bhītargāon. Though regrettably not at close range, one of the ASI photographs of ACII captures the base of a pilaster still *in situ* on the wall between the second and third terraces (Figs. 6.33 and 6.34). This pilaster fragment has since vanished.

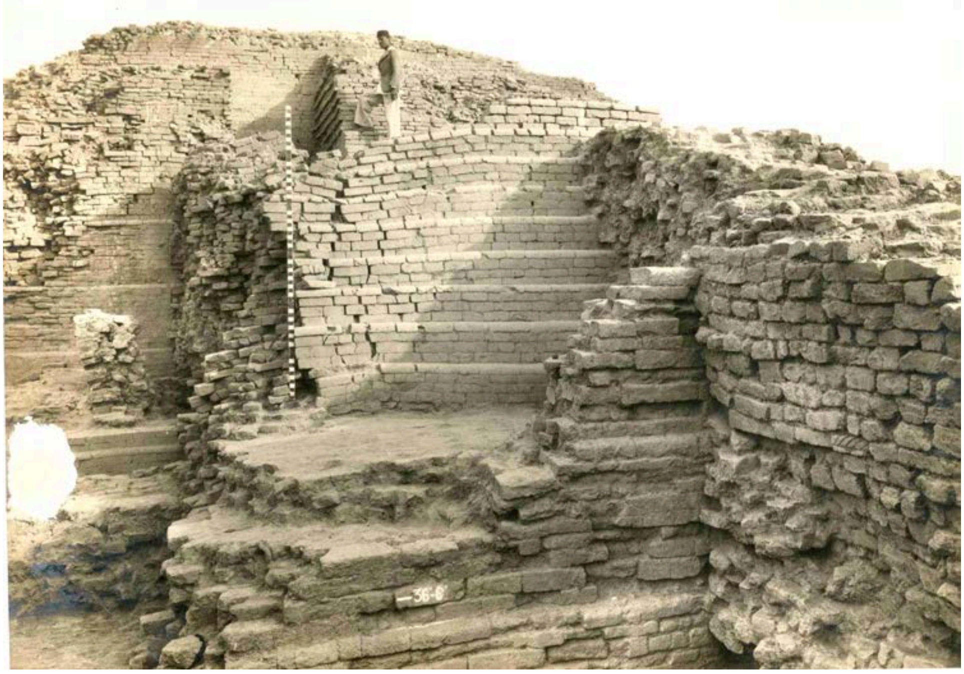


6.31. ACII during excavation. Photograph Courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.



6.32. Part of ACII following excavation. Photograph Courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

To the rear of ACII are the foundations of a smaller, though still substantial structure, with a series of paved rooms. The date of its construction is not recorded, though next to the monument is an eleventh century well. The ASI photographs show that the structure originally had wide staircases ascending in the direction of the pyramidal temple ACII (Figs. 6.35 to 6.37).



6.33. Image shows part of the west face of ACII with a pilaster fragment located in the upper left hand corner. Photograph Courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

6.34. The pilaster fragment located on the west face of ACII. Detail of photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

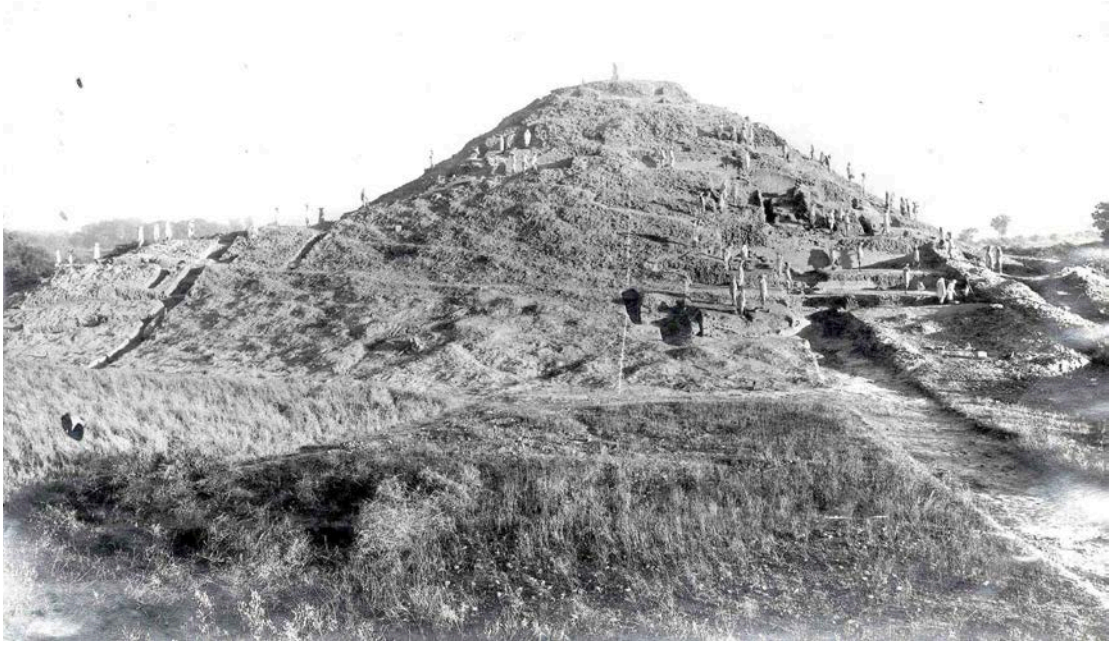
6.35. Mound to the east of ACII, viewed from the top of the terraced monument.

6.36. View towards ACII looking west. Photograph Courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

6.37. Staircase on mound to the east of ACII. Photograph Courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

Mound ACI

The monument, known as ACI or Bhimgaja, is awe inspiring in its vastness and dominates the plains for miles around. It is located on the exact same latitude as ACII, 400 m to the east. Like ACIII and ACII, it was excavated in the early 1940s, although work was never completed (Figs. 6.38 to 6.42). There is no record of why the excavations were brought to an abrupt halt, but since World War II was raging, funding for such a large-scale project would have been problematic. No plan of the structure has been published, which is unfortunate since its poor condition, and especially the ruinous state of its walls both laterally and in elevation, make the task of understanding its original form highly complicated (Figs. 6.43 and 6.44). Brick courses, for example, are difficult to establish with any accuracy since most of the walls have partially or completely collapsed. We will, however, systematically outline what can be understood of the monument from its foundations to its crowning shrine (Figs. 6.45 and 6.46).



6.38. ACI in the early stages of excavation. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

At present Bhimgaja appears to have five terraces, but it will be argued in this subchapter that there was, in actuality, a plinth, on top of which were three substantial terraces, the uppermost largely occupied by a temple. Before continuing, it is important to remember that ACI underwent renovations and expansions until around the eleventh century CE.[90] So, the monument we see today may have undergone some significant changes since its inception.

6.39. Approach to the west side (front entrance) of ACI.

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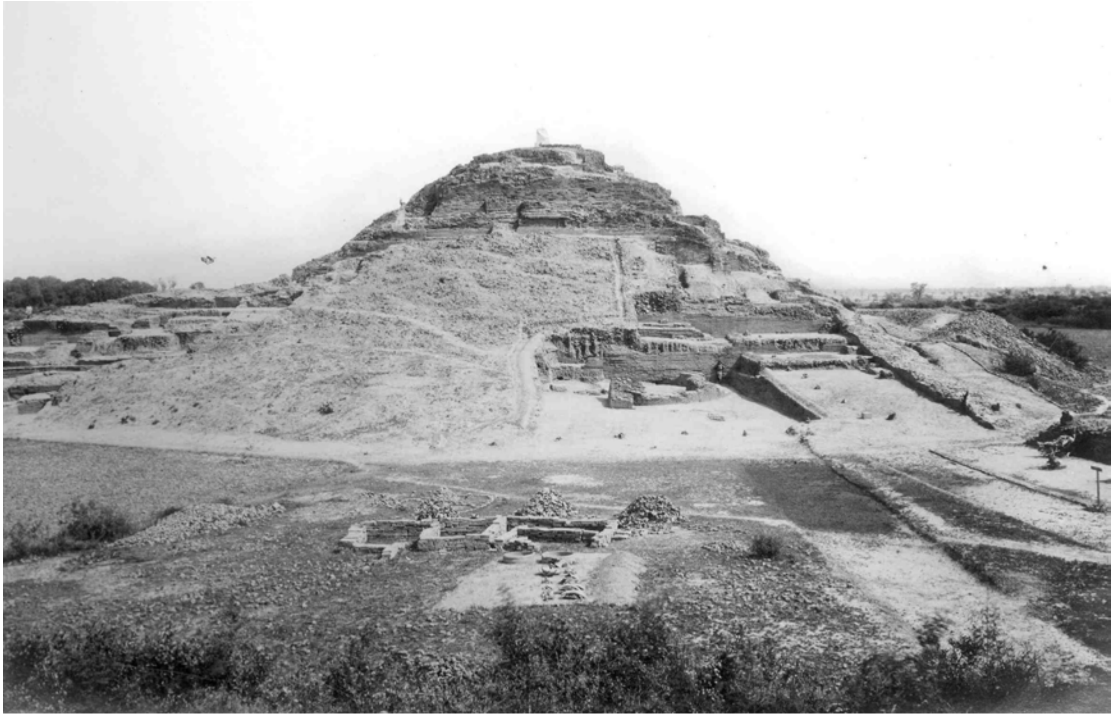
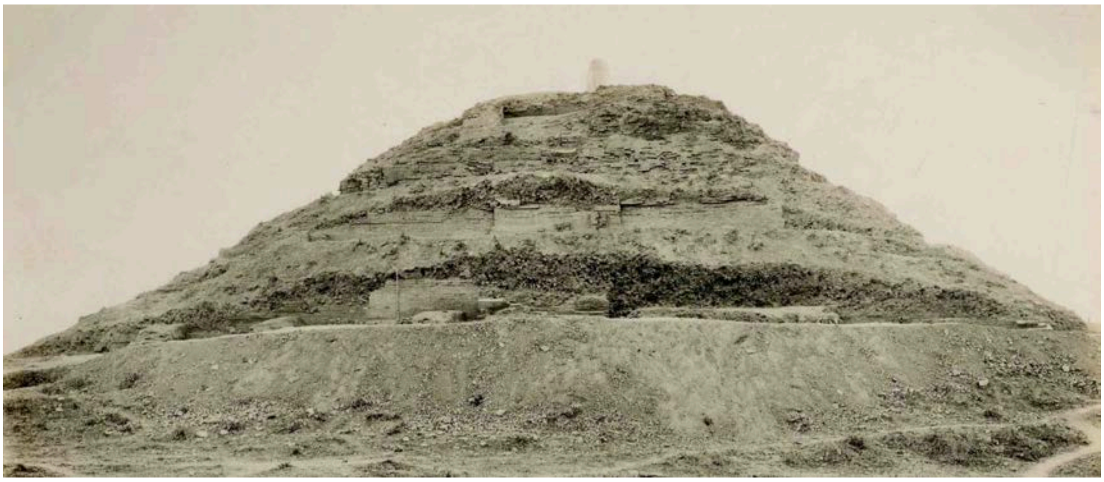
[90] Cited in Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple I*, p. 174.

6.40. ACI before excavation from the south. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.



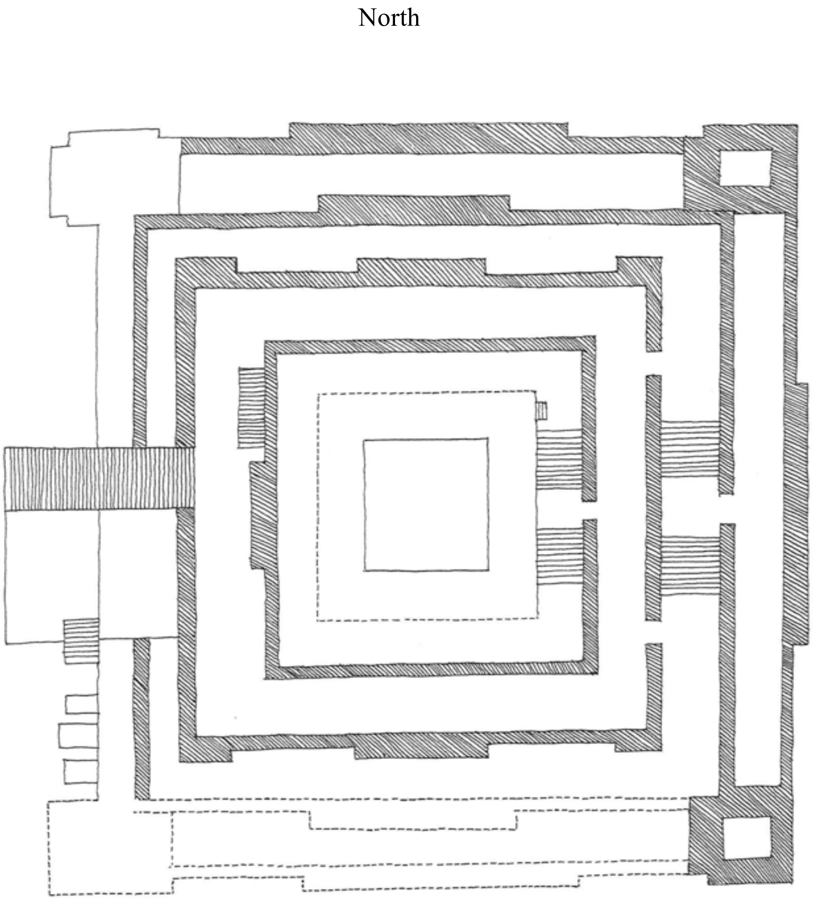
6.41. ACI taken from mound ACIV to the south. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

6.42. Northwest corner of ACI during excavation. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

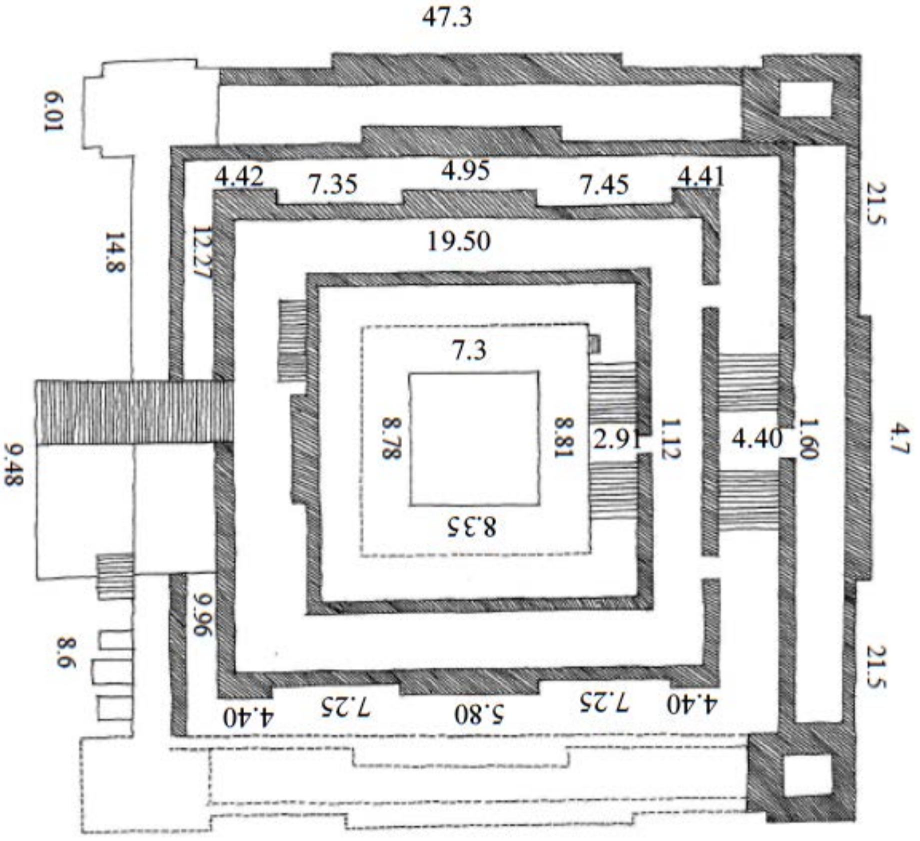


6.43. North side of ACI following excavation and prior to repair. Much of the outer facing, especially on the basement terrace was lost. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

6.44. The north face of ACI today.



6.45. Plan of ACI in its current state. The dotted lines represent walls which have either collapsed or have not been excavated.



6.46 Plan of ACI with measurements (in metres).

Foundations

The foundations of ACI were exposed in a small area on the south face of the monument. Here, it was discovered that ACI was built over the ruins of a circular or apsidal Kuṣāṇa brick structure – only part of which was unearthed during the excavations (Figs. 6.47 and 6.48). Numerous potsherds were contained within the building but its original purpose was not ascertained. Although its shape might suggest that it was a religious structure, possibly Buddhist in nature, unless further investigations are conducted, no light can be shed on it and no conclusions can be reached. It is worth pointing out, however, that it is common to find that religious monuments have been built on sites that have been previously consecrated by temples, even those of a different faith.

6.47. Circular or apsidal Kuṣāṇa period building at the foundation level of ACI on the south side. Part of the entrance to the monument can be seen in the image. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

6.48. Inside the circular or apsidal Kuṣāṇa period building at the foundation level of ACI on the south side. A multitude of potsherds were found inside the structure. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

Basement Terrace

Only the north and east sides of the basement terrace could be measured with accuracy since the west face is badly damaged on the south corner, while only part of the south face has been excavated. The monument measures 47.3 m in length on the north, and 47.7 m on the east, rendering the structure square in shape. On the north, south and west faces there are offsets at each corner measuring *c.* 6.01 m in length (Fig. 6.49). It is possible that there were originally offsets at each corner of the east wall as well. There are also *bhadra* offsets at the centre of each wall on the east and north sides. On the west side of the monument there is a large and off-centre projection. Ghosh informs us that 'there is no shrine on each storey, the only one being on the top.'[91] Yet the plan of the monument lends itself to having a small shrine at both corners of the basement terrace on the west face of the monument where the offsets project further. Incidentally, as discussed in Chapter 4, the Pawāyā monument had two subsidiary shrines on its basement terrace, one on either end of the east face of the monument (see Fig. 4.4).

The upper half of the wall of the base has eroded, lending it a stepped appearance (Fig. 6.50). Originally the wall may have risen to just below the base of the first set of stairways on the east face of the monument (Fig. 6.51). In its current state the basement terrace or plinth is approximately 20 brick courses, or 1.7 m in height. From the walkway of the first terrace up to the gateway through which the stairs are reached, there are ten brick courses (85 cm in total), roughly the correct dimensions needed for three steps. Oddly, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, there are no steps leading up from the ground level to the first platform on the east side of the monument. We can speculate that the wall might have been heavily renovated in the 1940s, obscuring any indication of stairways; or, that after the partition wall was built at Ahichhatrā in the post-Gupta period or thereabouts, access to the basement terrace from the east may have been restricted and a staircase would no longer have been necessary.

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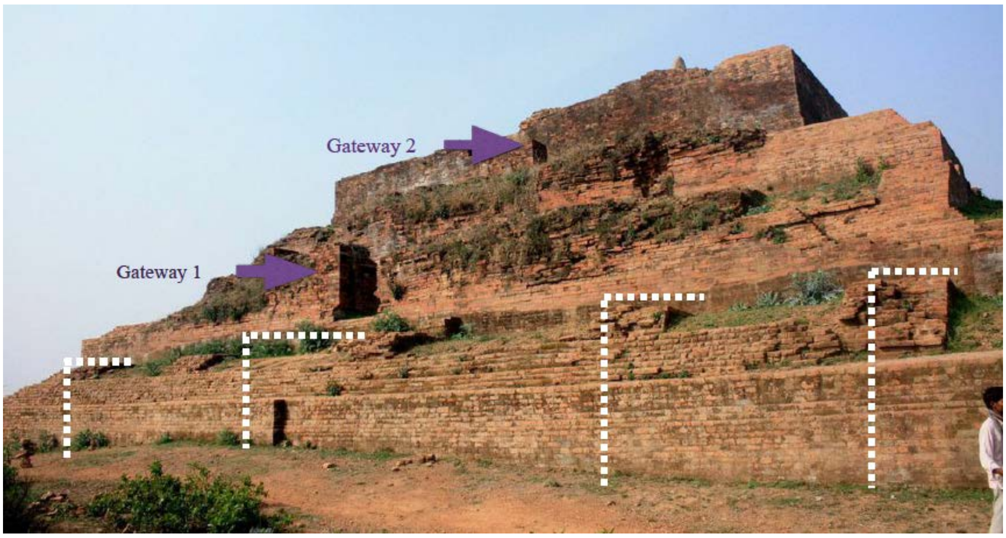
[91] Cited in Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple I*, p. 174.

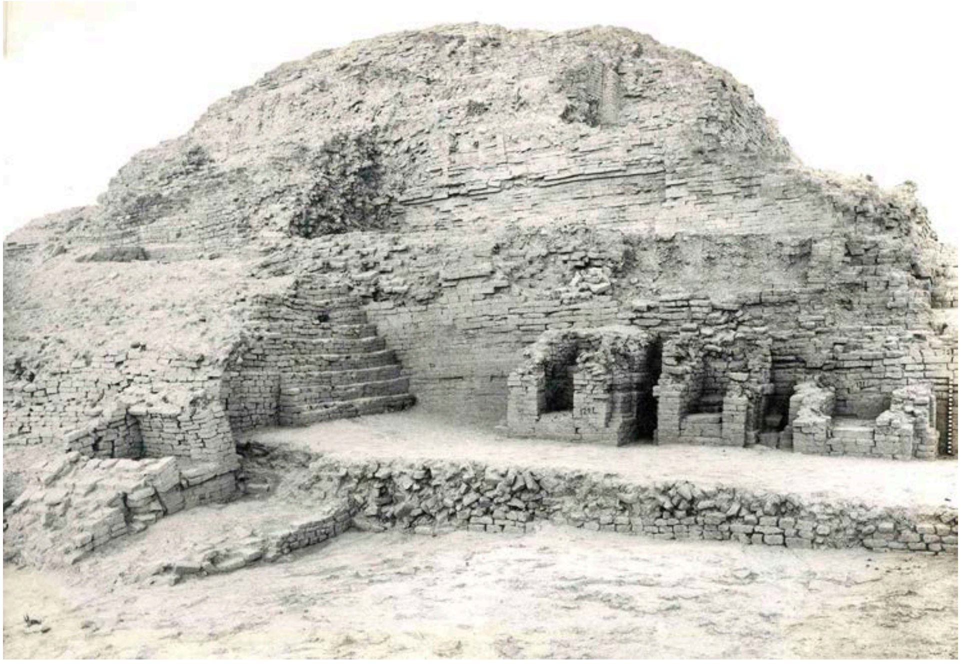
6.49. *The northwest corner of ACI.*

6.50. *Basement terrace or plinth of ACI to the east.*

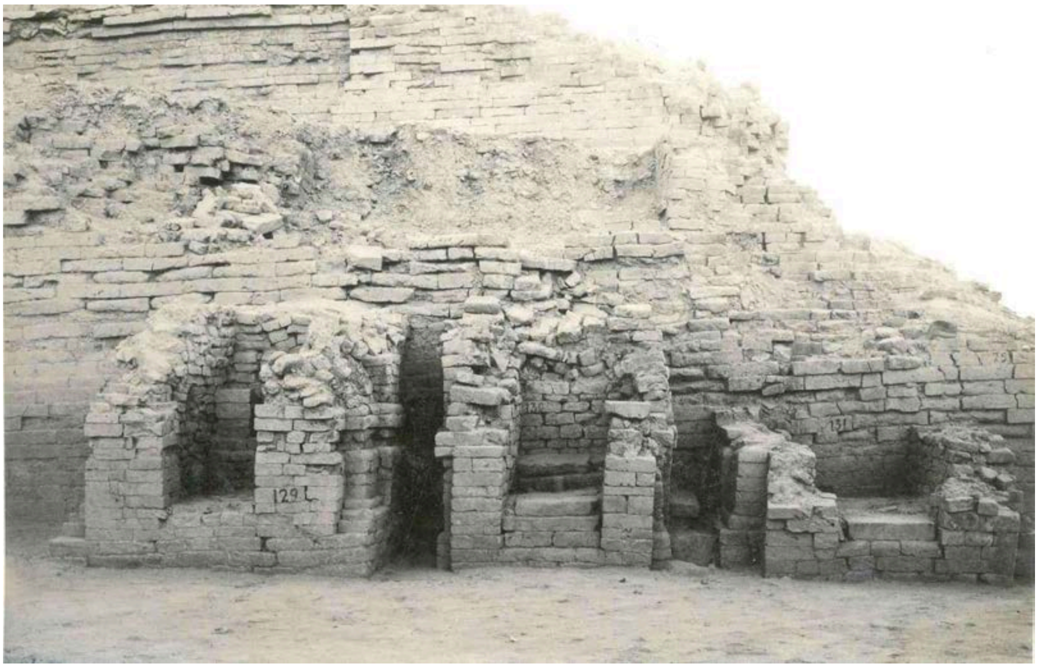


6.51. ACI from the east. The white dotted lines show the original height of the basement terrace.

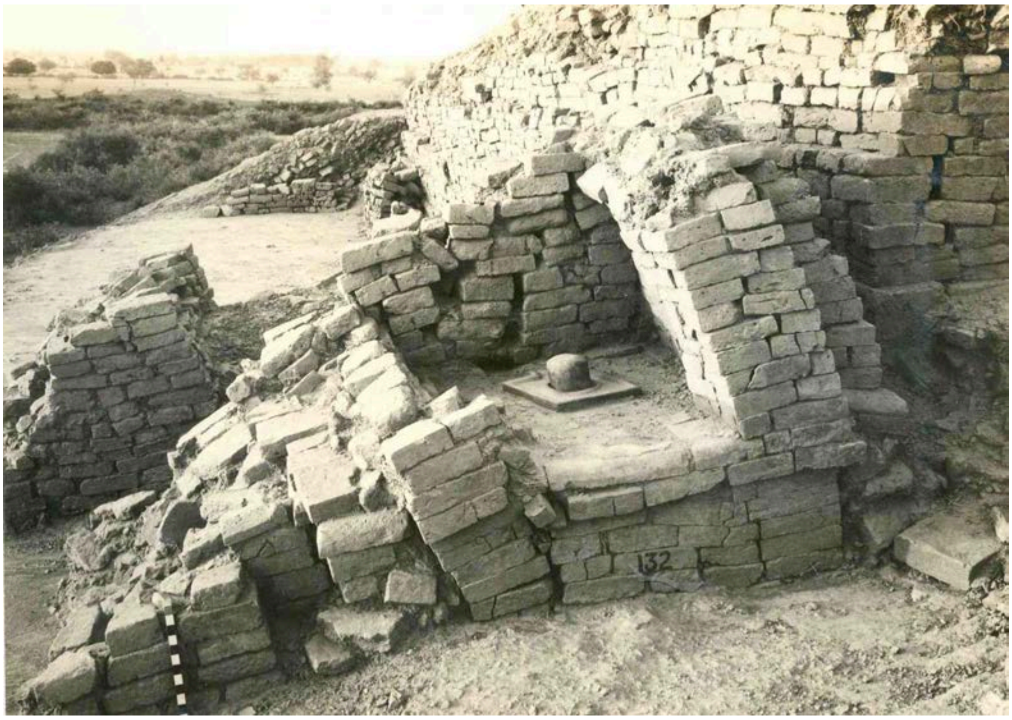
Leaning against the base of ACI on the right side of the west face, are a row of three ruined brick shrines. Originally there were at least four shrines, three of them containing *liṅgas* (Figs. 6.52 to 6.55). All of the shrines have offsets on their side walls, but no ornamental brickwork. It is probable that these are votive shrines, especially as they are not integrated into the basement wall of ACI. A loose ornamental carved brick dating to the ninth or tenth centuries is depicted above one of the shrines, although this may bear no relation to the votive structures.



6.52. Votive liṅga shrines at the base of ACI on the west. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.



6.53. From the left: shrine one measures 1.6 m in width and 1.48 m in depth. The floor of the shrine is 37 cm above ground level and the internal measurement of the shrine is 68 cm in width. The second shrine is located 27 cm to the right of shrine one. This structure is 1.17 m in width and 1.6 m in depth. The internal measurement is 53 cm in width. The third shrine is situated 30 cm to the right of shrine two. It measures 1.53 m in width and 2 m in depth. Its internal measurement is 73 cm and it contains a pedestal, 29 cm in height. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.



6.54. This liṅga shrine is no longer extant. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

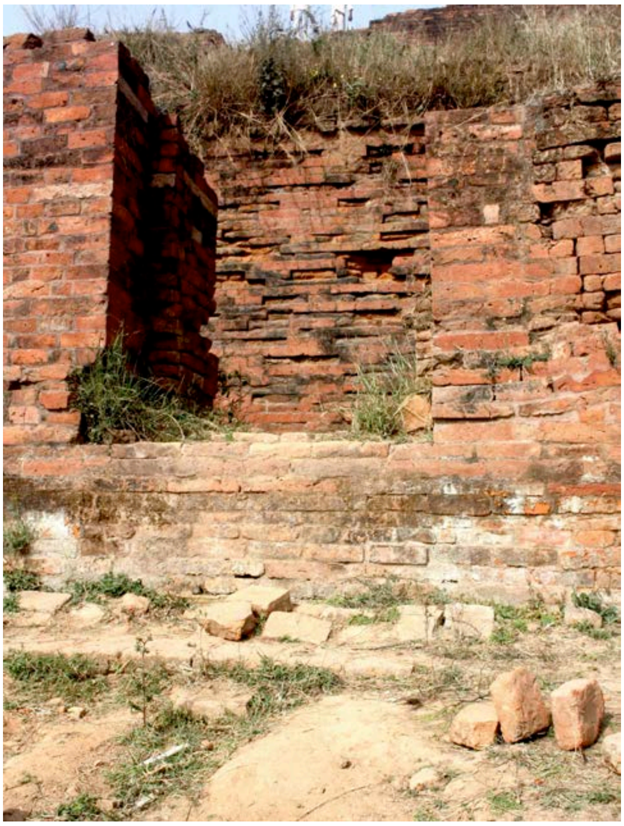
6.55. The liṅga shrines in 2012.

Platform One

There are two stairways on the east face with a shared landing, leading from the first to the second terrace (Figs. 6.56 and 6.57). To access the steps, one passes through a gateway 1.6 m wide and 1.42 m deep (Fig. 6.58). The staircases on both the left and right hand sides are 2.5 m in width, and approximately 2.5 m in height, although a few steps are missing. The steps are on average 26 cm in height and 38 cm deep. The distance between the inception of the gateway and the back wall is 4.4 m. Both flights of steps have suffered considerable damage since excavation.

6.56. Staircase on the right, leading up to the second platform on the east side of ACI. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

6.57. Staircase on the left, leading up to the second platform on the east side of ACI.



6.58. Gateway through to the first pair of staircases on the east face of ACI. There would have originally been three or four steps leading up to the gateway.

Platform Two

6.59. Staircase on the right, leading up to the third platform on the east side of ACI. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

The second terrace measures approximately 29 m in length on each side. The north and south sides have central *bhadra* offsets and corner projections, while the projection on the west face is asymmetrical and considerably larger. A gateway through to the second pair of staircases with a shared landing, leading up to the third terrace on the east side of the monument is 1.12 m in width and 97 cm in depth (Figs. 6.59 and 6.60). From the inception of the gateway to the back wall, the distance is 2.91 m. The staircases are approximately 2.42 m in height. The measurement between the two staircases is 2.95 m. The steps are 1.94 m wide. This terrace is narrower than the one below.

6.60. (a) Staircases leading from the second to third platform. A large fragment of the liṅga is lying in the stairwell, 2012; (b) view from the upper platform on the east side of ACI.

6.61. This so-called water conduit is 2.32 m in width and 88 cm in length. Its sidewalls are 72 cm in width with the inner part measuring 86 cm in width. There is a post-hole on the outer edge of each sidewall.

A structure identified by archaeologists as a water conduit (*pranalika*) is located on the north platform, to the right side of the *bhadra* projection (Fig. 6.61). It has not been positioned in symmetry with the rest of the monument and thus it might post-date the first phase of construction. To either side of this structure, are seven bowl-shaped holes, positioned flush against the wall each situated about 70 cm apart. Their shape suggests that, rather than being post holes, they were intended to contain water, which would then spill over and cascade down the seven or so shallow steps in front of them in a waterfall-like and highly theatrical fashion vaguely reminiscent of the manner in which water was integrated into the scheme at Cave 5, Udayagiri, explored in Chapter 9 (Figs. 6.62 to 6.64).

6.62. The shallow steps beneath the fourteen 'bowls'.

6.63. One of the fourteen holes – the base of the hole is bowl shaped and formed from terracotta.

6.64. Bowl-shaped hole with shallow steps descending in front of it.

Extraordinary terracotta Gaṅgā and Yamunā sculptures over 1.7 m in height were found situated in niches on the walls of ACI. About these sculptures Agrawala writes:

> Gaṅgā and Yamunā … installed in niches flanking the main steps leading up to the upper terrace of the Śiva temple in site ACI. Gaṅgā stands on her vehicle the *makara*, and Yamunā the tortoise. Kālidāsa mentions the two river goddesses as attendants of Śiva (*Kumārasaṃbhava*, VII, 42)…[92]

Vikrama's plan of the ACI monument demonstrates that he believes the main entrance to the temple was on the east.[93] This theory can be rejected, however, by referring to the 1940s post-excavation photographs. One of the images depicts the niche with a fragment of the Yamunā sculpture in it.[94] Beside the niche is the lower half of a pilaster (Fig. 6.65). Surprisingly, part of this pilaster is still extant today, making it possible to find the original location of the Yamunā niche on the wall of the second platform on the west face of the monument (Figs. 6.66 to 6.68). I would argue, then, that from the monument's inception, the main entrance was on the west, although the crowning temple could also be reached *via* the east. Running one brick course beneath

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[92] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 29.

[93] Vikrama, 'The Forgotten Giant', p. 9.

[94] Gaṅgā and Yamunā sculptures, were, to the the best of my knowledge, always positioned near the entrance to a temple during and following the Gupta period. Some of the early temples that have sculptural representations of the river goddesses outside the entrance to the sanctum or porch include those at Bhītargāon, Deogaṛh, Nāchnā Kuṭhārā (the Pārvatī temple) and Udayagiri Cave 5.

the fragmented pilaster are traces of a *kapota* (roll cornice), four courses high. Parts of this also survive on the south face of the monument.

6.65. Yamunā niche and fragmented pilaster on the west face of ACI. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

The pilaster fragment shares some similarities with the pilasters on the temple at Bhītargāon. Zaheer suggests that the latter pilasters each consist of sixteen components;[95] Hardy, though, has identified fourteen individual parts (Fig. 6.69).[96] About the pedestals on the pilasters at Bhītargāon, Zaheer writes:

> The pedestal has four components. The lowest one, which for the sake of convenience may be called footing was originally a rectangular carved brick … The component above the footing which may be called support is divided horizontally into two sections. The lower part is rectangular and the upper trapezoid bevelled at the top. The upper section is plain and the lower decorated. This piece is 6 cm narrower than the footing … Above the support is the *kumbha* or waterpot which is of the thickness of two bricks and is only slightly rounded at the corners … Surmounting the water-pot is the rim similar to the support but placed in reverse position … [97]

This description fits closely with the pedestal surviving on ACI, except that at Ahichhatrā there is a rectangular base brick beneath the *kumbha* foot. The shaft is also narrower and more delicate than those at Bhītargāon.

6.66. The pilaster fragment today.

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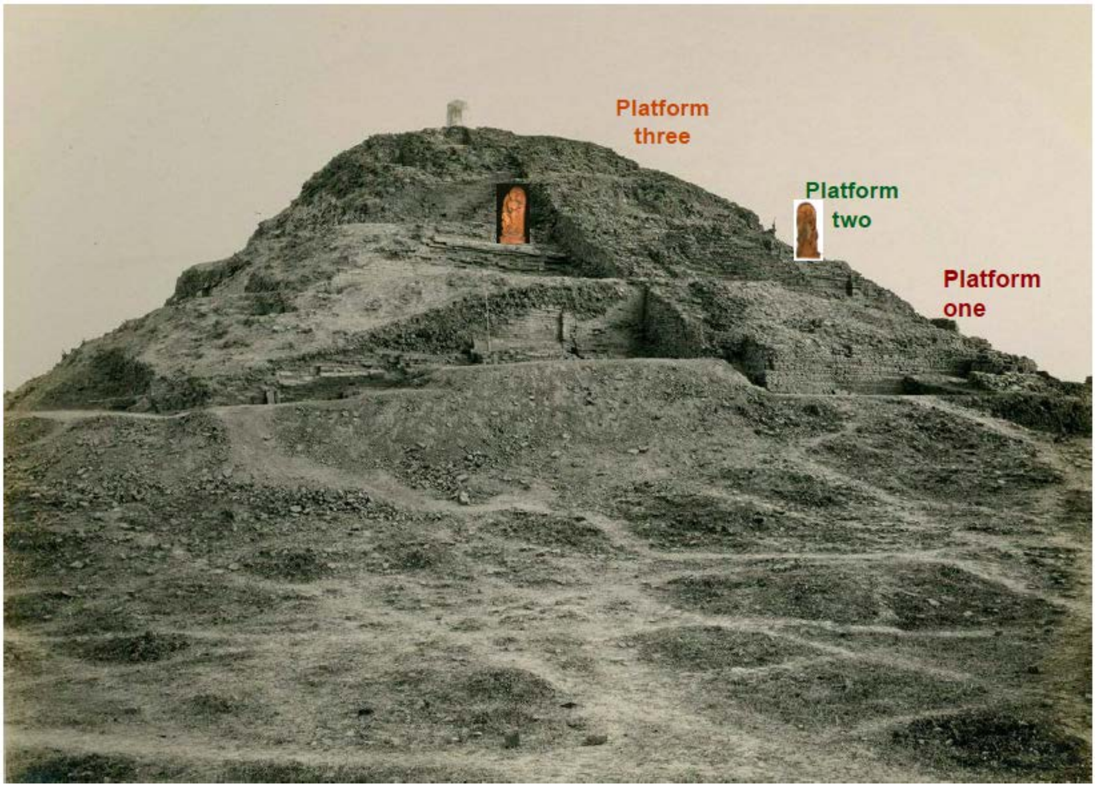
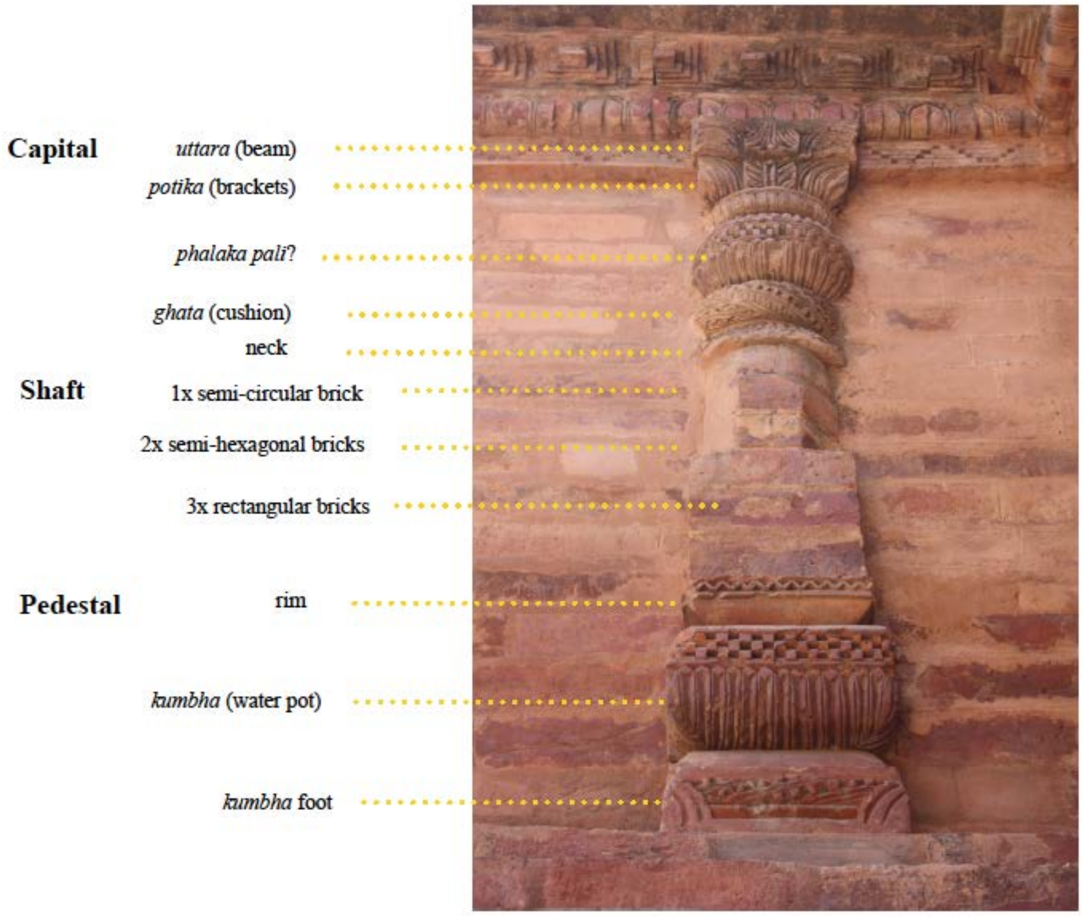
[95] Zaheer, p. 30.
[96] Adam Hardy, Personal Communication.
[97] Zaheer, pp. 30-31.

6.67. *The empty Yamunā niche today.*



6.68. River goddess sculptures superimposed onto an image of the west face of ACI. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.



6.69. A pilaster on the brick temple at Bhītargāon.

Platform Three

Several terracotta plaques, many illustrating Śiva in his various forms, or stories relating to the exploits of the god, were recovered from the wall of the third terrace.[98] These will be discussed at length in Chapter 11. On the left side of the projection on the west face of ACI is a fragmentary flight of steps leading to the uppermost platform (Fig. 6.70). It is plausible that an identical flight of steps would have also been positioned to the right of the projection. Also worthy of note is a step with two circular post holes in it, about 80 cm apart, located near the corner on the right side of the west face of the monument. It is possible that a gateway might have been situated here.

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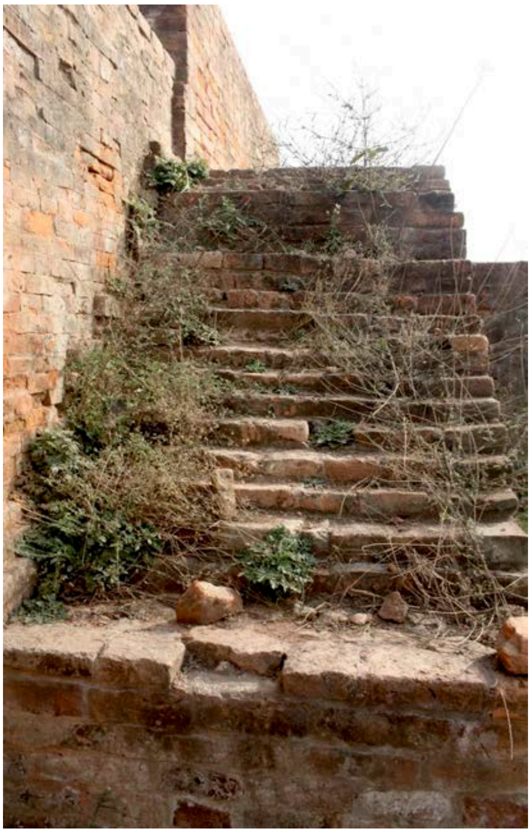
[98] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 63.



6.70. Flight of steps on the west face, photograph taken from the northwest.

Projection on the West Face of ACI

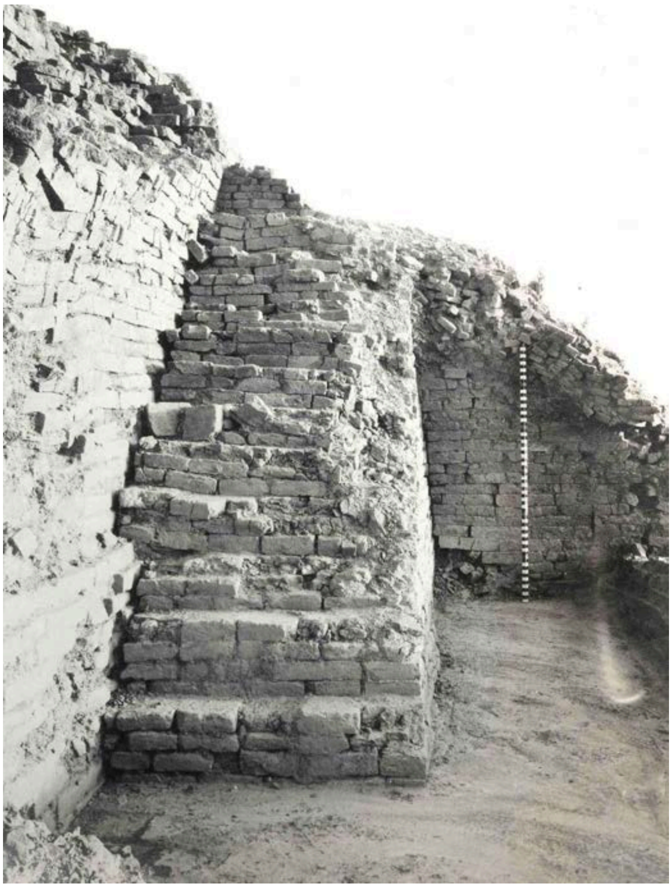
An oddity of the ACI monument is the projection or substantial *bhadra* offset on the west face, which rises from the ground level to the third platform (Fig. 6.71). Strangely, the projection is not situated in symmetrical alignment with the monument despite most other elements of the structure, such as the staircases on the east face, suggesting that symmetry was taken into acount when the monument was first erected. As previously discussed, the projection on the west face of ACII functioned as a grand entrance composed of several staircases on different axes. The same does not appear to be true of ACI, although, there is apparently a long flight of steps on the left side of the projection (Figs. 6.72 and 6.73). These 'steps', however, are problematic for the following reasons: firstly, they do not reach down to the ground level; secondly, the steps are too narrow to climb (only a young child can manage it); and thirdly, the 'staircase' is interrupted at the base by an intersecting wall. There are a number of possibilities here; for example, either the steps we see today are actually the foundations of a staircase, with the intersecting wall at the base being a later addition to the structure; or this is not a staircase at all, but had an altogether different function such as providing a buttress wall. It is quite possible that the entire projection is the result of a series of later additions and transformations. If it were not for the Gaṅgā and Yamunā sculptures on the west face, explicitly indicating that this is the front of the structure, we might even question whether the crowning temple was originally only accessible from the east.

6.71. ACI from the west. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

6.72. Bhadra offset on the west face of ACI taken from the northwest.

As mentioned above, cutting into the so-called staircase at basement level is a wall. Post-excavation photographs show that the brick facing of the wall was gently stepped in a way that is reminiscent of the later base at Pawāyā and of some of the brickwork on the west face of ACII. This wall has since been rebuilt and is now flat-fronted. Lastly, an ASI photograph records a staircase leading from the ground level to the first platform on the left side of the projection (Fig. 6.74). This flight of steps is no longer extant.

6.73. The so-called stairs forming part of the projection on the west face of ACI.



6.74. A no-longer extant flight of steps leading up to the first platform on the left side of the west face of ACI. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

The Shrine

According to Cunningham, mound I (ACI) was 20 m in height, with the floor of the temple being located 18.2 m above ground level.[99] The foundations of the crowning shrine were still extant at the time of his visit, and he published both the dimensions of the structure and a floor plan (Fig. 6.75). The layout of the monument is highly unusual amongst the corpus of early Indian temple architecture. Cunningham describes the inner sanctum of the temple as measuring 4.3 m by 3.2 m. The north and south walls were 2.8 m thick, while the east and west walls were 1.75 m deep. There was an open porch on both the east and west sides which increased the depth of the wall by 5.79 m on the west and 4.5 m on the east. [100]

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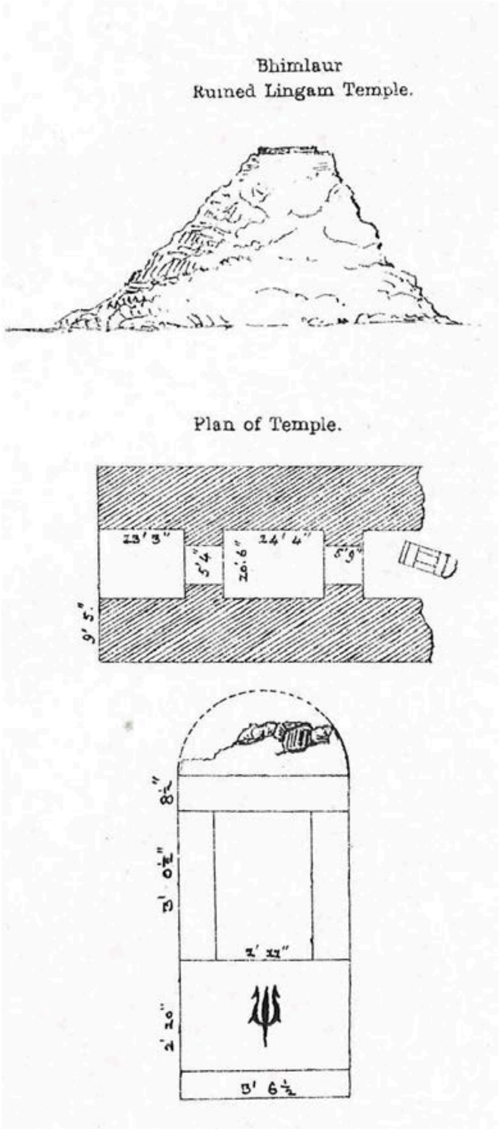
[99] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 259.
[100] Ibid., p. 259.

The exterior dimensions of the temple were 14.7 m by 8.9 m. From these measurements, Cunningham estimated that the temple must have been around 30.4 m in height.[101] This is unrealistic – the main body of the Gupta temple at Bhītargāon, for example, measures 11 x 11 m, while its height is a little over 15 m. Admittedly the Bhītargāon temple would have been marginally taller in its complete state, but nevertheless, it suggests that the temple at Ahichhatrā is more likely to have been in the region of 12 to 20 m in height.



6.75. Cunningham's drawings of the Bhimgaja mound, the foundations of the temple which surmounted the terraces, and its liṅga.[102]

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[101] Ibid., p. 259.

[102] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, Plate XLIV.

A number of issues arise with regards to Cunningham's temple plan; the most notable being that the current dimensions of the upper terrace at ACI are 7.3 m on the north, 8.81 m on the east, 8.35 m on the south and 8.78 m on the west.[103] Cunningham describes the external measurements of the temple as being 14.7 m by 8.9 m. The length of the temple then, extends 5.8 m beyond the current length of the upper terrace proper; the width though is roughly in accordance with our measurements. The second anomaly is that the temple described by Cunningham is rectangular in plan, while the monument is square. If for a moment, however, we only take into account the *garbhagṛha* and the two internal passageways (*antarālaya*), then the external dimensions of the structure would be *c.* 8.9 m by 8 m – almost square. Based on these measurements, it might be argued that what currently functions as the uppermost terrace in actuality constitutes the raised foundations of the shrine and two small passageways (Fig. 6.76). If this is the case, then the upper terrace would begin above the second pair of staircases on the east, and thus the dimensions of the upper platform would be approximately 19.5 m on each side. The depth of the staircases and gateway on the east is 2.91 m in total, which leaves 16.59 m for the temple.

The open *ardhamaṇḍapa* (porch) on the east was 2.75 m in length, while on the west the *ardhamaṇḍapa* was 4.15 m in length. Cunningham's temple plan, however, shows that the porch walls on the east were damaged. There are two possibilities here: either the east porch was indeed shorter to allow for the room taken up by the staircases, or alternatively it shared the same dimensions as the west porch, which would bring the total length of the temple to 16 m. Theoretically speaking, one might enter each *ardhamaṇḍapa* via a flight of steps. This arrangement would be strongly reminiscent of the Bhītargāon temple, except that ACI had two entrances. Moreover, the Bhītargāon temple is on a *triratha* plan, while, according to Cunningham's drawing, the temple at ACI was not. At Bhītargāon, at the Mahābōdhi temple in Bodhgayā and at many of the stone temples of the Gupta period, the porches were narrower than the temple proper, which is arguably a more elegant arrangement. At ACI the porches must have been integrated into the main body of the temple. To the best of my knowledge, no *āmalasāraka* fragments were found at ACI so we might very tentatively conjecture that the temple could have been rectangular in shape and

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[103] The walls of the so-called upper terrace are badly damaged, which might explain the small discrepancy between my measurements and Cunningham's.

valabhī in design, crowned with a *śālā* (barrel-vaulted roof). This hypothesis is based on the design of the temple at Bhītargāon, although in the latter case the pinnacle of the *śikhara* is missing.

Vikrama, too, suggests parallels between the Bhītargāon temple and ACI, imagining a single roomed shrine with its external walls on a *triratha* plan. He writes:

> … the temple on plan, shows an early form with only one cell for sanctum, the very fact places this temple earlier in time than Bhitargaon, which has a small cell attached with the sanctum through a narrow passage. The placement of the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna flanking the entrance to the 3rd terrace stairway is also an indication that the temple is the earliest and might have been built during the reign of Samudragupta himself.[104]

Vikrama's hypothesis is not based on Cunningham's description of the temple foundations. Confusion may have arisen because the latter's plan of the temple and drawing of the *liṅga* has been titled *Bhimlaur*, rather than *Bhimgaja*. It is likely, however, that the name was an error on the part of the draughtsman. As Cunningham writes:

> My account of *Ahi-chhatra* would not be complete without a reference to the gigantic *lingam* near the village of *Gulariya*, 2 ½ miles to the north of the fort, and to the Priapian name of the village of *Bhim-laur*, one mile to the east of the fort. *Bhim-gaja* and *Bhim-laur* are common names for the *lingam* in all districts to the north of the Ganges.[105]

There are no mounds of any description around Bhimlaur and, moreover, it is evident from Cunningham's text that the locality has been invoked solely to make a point about its name. Lastly, Cunningham has made it absolutely explicit in his report that he is describing and illustrating the foundations of a ruined temple at the pinnacle of Bhimgaja.

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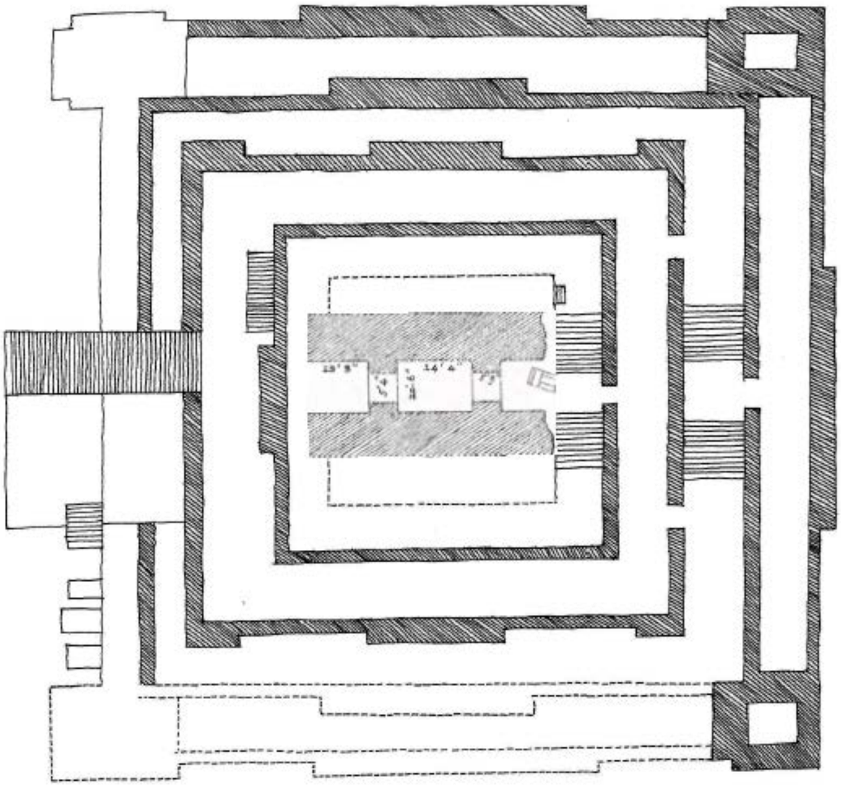
[104] Vikrama, 'The Forgotten Giant', p. 9.

[105] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 265.



6.76. The plan of ACI superimposed with Cunningham's drawing of the temple foundations.

Cunningham describes the sandstone Śiva *liṅga* on top of ACI (Fig. 6.77) as being 2.4 m in height and 1.1 m in diameter. He writes:

> The base of the stone *lingam* is square, the middle part octagonal, and the upper part hemispherical. A *trisula*, or trident, is cut upon the base. The upper portion of the lingam is broken. The people say that it was struck by lightning, but from the unshattered state of the large block I am more disposed to ascribe the fracture to the hammer of the Muhammadans.[106]

Cunningham's description matches the *liṅga* on top of ACI in all respects but one; there is no *triśūla* (trident) carved into its base. Daljeet Saroya of *The South Asian Heritage Foundation* spent days diligently searching for evidence of the *triśūla* without any success, while I also had a thorough look. The *liṅga* is fractured in its upper portion, and the fragments are lying in the vicinity, one piece on a stairwell, while another fragment is lying in the bushes to the east of ACI. The fragments have been used repeatedly as mortars. Notably, the *liṅga* crowning ACI is in accordance

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[106] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 259.

with the description in Varāhamira's encyclopaedic *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, which dates to the sixth century CE.[107]

6.77. ACI: foundations of the shrine and the Śiva liṅga.

Foreground of ACI

The continued importance of the Bhimgaja temple right up until the city's demise is evidenced by the foundations of several shrines clustered close to one another in front of the monument on the west, like votive offerings (Figs. 6.78 and 6.79). Only one of the shrines has been photographed at close range following excavation, and on the basis of its elegant carved bricks, it can be assigned to the ninth or tenth centuries CE (Figs. 6.80 and 6.81). Though it is not on a stellate plan, the temple may have had a curvilinear *latina* spire merging seamlessly into its *jaṅghā* (wall proper), as we find, for example, at the eighth to tenth century brick temples of Nibhyakedha, Kherahat and Mohangarh (Fig. 6.82).[108]

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[107] Adh: LVIII. Sl. 53-53 in *Varahamira's Brihat Samhita*, trans. by Panditabhushana V. Subrahmanya Sastri, (Bangalore: V.B. Soobbiah & Sons, 1946), pp. 515-516.

[108] See Michael D. Willis, 'A Brick Temple of the Ninth Century', *Artibus Asiae*, 52 (1992), pp. 25-46.

6.78. *Excavated land directly to the west of ACI revealing the foundations of several temples. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.*

6.79. *The foreground of ACI to the west in 2012.*

6.80. The base of a ninth or tenth century temple with elegant carved bricks, situated in the foreground of ACI. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

6.81. Ninth and tenth century carved bricks collected to the west of ACI. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

A fragment of an exceptional stone sculpture of a standing Viṣṇu was found in the vicinity of Bhimgaja and dates to *circa* the ninth or tenth century CE (Fig. 6.83). It was probably the enshrined image in one of the smaller temples. To the best of my knowledge, this image has never been published before, and neither am I aware of its current whereabouts. The style of the sculpture is reminiscent of those of a similar date hailing from the region of Haryana, but the quality of the carving is the finest I have seen of its type. The sculpture might have been deliberately mutilated because the image of Viṣṇu is lost, with only his feet and right arms still extant. In his raised upper right hand he holds a *gadā* (mace) – an attribute of Viṣṇu – while his lower right hand points towards the earth, palm facing forwards. The left side of the composition is complete and depicts sinuous attendant figures, one holding a cobra, alongside a *makara*, leogryph and elephant head.

6.82. Brick temple belonging to circa the ninth century CE, at Nibhyakedha in the Kanpur District of Uttar Pradesh.

6.83. Stone fragment of a ninth or tenth century standing Viṣṇu found in the area of ACI at Ahichhatrā. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

Is ACI an Aiḍūka?

Scholars such as V. S. Agrawala (1948) and F. R. Allchin (1957)[109] have described ACI at Ahichhatrā as a Śaiva *eḍūka*,[110] while Shrimali takes the argument further suggesting that it may have started life as a Buddhist *eḍūka*.[111] The supposition that ACI is an *eḍūka* or *aiḍūka* is based on an illuminating passage in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* (III. 84. 1-15).[112]

> Listen to me as I explain to you how to make the form of the *aiḍūka*. By worshipping the *aiḍūka* one will have accomplished the worship of the entire universe. The learned one should make a *bhadrapīṭha* equipped with excellent stairways, four in number in accordance with the directions. Best of Yādavas, oh destroyer of your enemies.
>
> He should build on top of that a second *bhadrapīṭha* and above that another of the same kind, oh crusher of your foes. And above that the knowing one should fashion the form of a *liṅga* and that therein should be made brilliant with the lines prescribed for the *liṅga*.
>
> In the centre of that, he should have made a square unmoving staff, which has four sides and above that should be made thirteen storeys and above that should be fashioned the *āmalaka*. Above that should be constructed a pole which is perfectly round. This staff should be adorned with a *chandrikā* design in the centre of a half moon.

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[109] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 167; and F. R. Allchin, ‘ Sanskrit “Eḍūka " - Pali "Eluka"’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 20 (1957), pp. 1-4 (p. 1).

[110] The correct transliteration is *aiḍuka.*

[111] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 150.

[112] The *aiḍūka* is explored towards the end of several chapters on image-making. Descriptions of architectural forms, however, recommence only two chapters later (ch. 86). It should be noted that Kramrisch’s 1928 translation of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa, Khaṇḍa III* ends with Chapter 85. This has served to make the *aiḍūka* look very much out of place in this part of the *purāṇa*. For a translation of the entire *khaṇḍa*, see *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa, Translated in to English from Original Sanskrit Text*, trans. by Priyabala Shah (Delhi: Parimal Publications, 2005). Interestingly, Chapter 86 of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* mentions a type of structure (called Himavān), which consists in part of a triple-tiered platform surmounted by a *valabhī* temple. In a forthcoming publication, Adam Hardy persuasively argues that the text is describing early Kashmiri temples (draft of ‘Kashmiri Temples: a Typological and Aedicular Analysis’ (2015), pp. 1-27).

> The levels which I have referred too and the *āmalasāraka* you should know to be the 14 worlds.
>
> The god Maheśvara is in the *liṅgaṃ* and then the circular staff is Brahmā and the quadrilateral staff is the god Viṣṇu. And the three *bhadrapīṭhas* are to be understood to be the *guṇas*. The three worlds of the moving and unmoving are the locus of the *guṇas*. Below the *bhuvanas* (14 *bhūmis*) and above the *liṅga* he should place the Lokapālas carrying the pikes in the four directions called Viruda, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Virūpākṣha and Kubera. They should be radiant, beautiful, and wearing the garments of the sun and all of them should be portrayed wearing armour and adorned with fine jewellery.
>
> O Indra, know that Viruda is Gaṇeśa, know that Dhṛtarāṣṭra is Yama, leader of the worlds. Know that Virūpākṣha is Varuṇa, lord of the waters. Know that rājā rājā is Kubera.[113] This that I have explained to you oh leader… Yadu, thus has been described to me the form of the *aiḍūka* which is called *prajā*[114] for the welfare of the people.[115]

To summarise in brief, the text describes a triple-tiered base with staircases in the four cardinal directions. A *liṅga* is situated at the apex, out of which rises a square staff. Over the staff are thirteen storeys capped by an *āmalasāraka*; above this is placed a rounded staff (*yaṣṭi*). The *lokapālas* – in Hinduism, the guardians of the four directions – are vaguely located above the *liṅga*. Bakker suggests that they might be situated on each side of the square staff.[116] Interestingly, the *lokapālas* described are Buddhist deities, and later we are told that these are one and the same as the Hindu gods, Gaṇeśa, Yama, Varuṇa and Kubera. Meaning has been ascribed to the *bhadrapīṭhas* (platforms); here they are said to represent the three *guṇas* or aspects. These aspects are *sattva* (truth), *rajas* (action), and *tamas* (darkness, delusion).[117] So, based on the tentative supposition that the *guṇas* were arranged in the following

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[113] Viruda is on the South, Kubera on the North, Dhṛtarāṣṭra on the East, and Virūpākṣha on the West.

[114] *Prajā* means ‘subjects of the king’.

[115] Alexis Sanderson kindly translated the passage for this thesis in the Summer of 2013, correcting some of the minor errors in Stella Kramrisch’s translation (1928).

[116] Bakker, ‘Monuments to the Dead’, p. 13. Arguably, this text could be describing a temple with a *lokapāla* on each of the external walls. The shrine could house the *liṅga* while the hypothetical superstructure would be formed of thirteen storeys. The wording of the text though, makes this interpretation rather improbable.

[117] Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva* (Princeton and New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 167.

order: *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*, then metaphorically speaking, by climbing to the pinnacle of the *bhadrapīṭhas* one would be ascending from the darkness and delusion into the light and truth.

Bakker describes how the term *aiḍūka* can mean 'derived from/ related to/ of the nature of the *eḍūka.'*[118] The latter is a funerary monument or ossuary, whereas the *aiḍūka* has 'some formal correspondences with the funerary monuments … [but does] not contain the actual mortuary remains.'[119] Bakker has dismissed the association of the Śiva monument at Ahichhatrā with the *aiḍūka* of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* on the grounds that what the text is describing is 'explicitly not a temple, and not dedicated to one god in particular.'[120] It might be surmised, however, that since a *liṅga* is described here, Śiva might be the presiding deity of this monument. Returning to Ahichhatrā, Bakker also draws attention to the fact that *yaṣṭis,* an *āmalasāraka*, and *bhūmikās* (storeys) were not reported as found during the excavation of the structure. Since nothing of the temple has survived apart from the monumental *liṅga*, this is not surprising. Bakker further comments that ACI has five terraces, not three. While this is true of the monument in its current altered state, in actuality the structure had a plinth and three platforms, the uppermost platform occupied by a large temple. This will be discussed in Chapter 6.

The question of whether the Pravareśvara temple at Mansar is an *aiḍūka* is broached by Bakker, and is certainly intriguing. Most interesting of all is the discovery of the large and much-damaged clay 'Man of Mansar,' a figure of the primordial Puruṣa, found lying in a foetal position in a pit. Bakker believes that this figure was 'sacrificed' in place of a human being. A *vedi* was discovered over the chest of the 'man' with a hole for supporting a *yaṣṭi.*[121] Next to this figure two fragmented pots were found and Bakker questions whether they may once have contained ashes. Quite rightly, he does not take this finding to infer that the terraced brick structure was an *aiḍūka*. He writes, 'for the time being our conclusion should be that so-far there have not been discovered in the Hindu sphere structures that conform, more than

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[118] Bakker, 'Monuments to the Dead', p. 13.
[119] Ibid., p. 19.
[120] Ibid., p. 25.
[121] Ibid., p. 28.

superficially, to the description of *aiḍūka* in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*.'[122] Summing up his argument, Bakker suggests that we should think of *eḍūkas* and *aiḍukas* as being:

> Vertical, elongated or needle-like constructions, mostly of brick … combined with one or more *yaṣṭis*, round or square pillars or poles, raised by way of a commemorative column. The general Hindu reluctance to connect it with actual remains of the dead rendered it futile: being neither temple nor relic sanctuary there were not enough incentives to construct, worship and maintain it; the Hindu funerary monument or *aiḍuka* never really came off the ground. The only specimen recognized as such by some scholars is the one preserved in Ahichhatra, where no mortuary deposits seem to have been found (for this we reserved the word '*aiḍuka*'), but this identification is spurious. The *aiḍuka* of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* is a hybrid product of śāstric imagination, calqued on a Buddhist example.[123]

Contrary to Bakker, in an article published in 1971, Pratapaditya Pal compellingly argues that the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* is, in actuality, describing a non-sectarian *stūpa*. Pal's reading of the "Veṅkaṭeśvara" edition of the text is as follows:

> The substructure consists of three superimposed *bhadrapīṭhas* adorned with elegant flights of stairs on each cardinal face. Above the third *bhadrapīṭha* should be the *liṅga*, which, however, should not manifest any *rekhā* or line. From the middle of this *liṅga* rises the foursided immovable staff or *yaṣṭi* above which soars the thirteen *bhūmikās* (stages or tiers). On the thirteenth tier rests the *āmalasāraka* above which is a staff supporting a parasol. At the centre of this parasol are the symbols of the sun and moon.[124]

Thus, Pal's interpretation differs from Sanderson's on two points; firstly, that the *liṅga* has no lines (here, Bakker agrees with Pal),[125] and secondly, that a parasol surmounts the structure (unlike Bakker and Sanderson, Pal translates the term

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[122] Ibid., p. 29.
[123] Ibid., p. 43.
[124] Pratapaditya Pal, 'The *Aiḍuka* of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* and Certain Aspects of Stūpa Symbolism', *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* (1971), pp. 49-62 (p. 49). It should be noted here that Kramrisch translated from the Baroda edition of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*, while, like Pal, Sanderson translated from the Veṅkaṭeśvara edition.
[125] Bakker, 'Monuments to the Dead', p. 12.

rājanyasuvartulā to mean parasol rather than medallion).[126] Key to Pal's argument is his interpretation of the unlined *liṅga* as being the dome of a *stūpa*.[127] He writes:

> … there should be no reason to question the basic structural similarity between the *stūpa* and the *aiḍūka* … it will at once be apparent that with a vertical elongation, often witnessed in *stūpas* in India from the Gupta period onwards or in Nepal, it would attain a phallic character and thus become confused with a *liṅga*, which is what happened in predominantly Śaiva Nepal.[128]

A problematic aspect of Pal's theory is that the text explicitly describes the *liṅga* as containing Maheśvara (Śiva), which fits somewhat awkwardly with his non-sectarian argument. On the other hand, though, thirteen-tiered *chatrāvalīs* (umbrellas) were frequently associated with Buddhist shrines in the early period.[129] An early Hindu shrine with a thirteen-storeyed superstructure, however, would be entirely fictitious. In conclusion, Pal suggests that the *aiḍuka* was 'included in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* as a concession to Buddhism and given a universal symbolism.'[130]

Neither the shaft at the heart of the monument, nor the foundations of ACI have been fully excavated so we cannot be entirely sure that no mortuary remains exist. Nevertheless, without further evidence being bought to light, we cannot designate ACI at Ahichhatrā an *aiḍūka* with any confidence, regardless of whether Bakker's or Pal's interpretation is the more accurate. To begin with, we know that ACI was crowned with a rectangular temple of relatively large proportions dedicated to Śiva (explored in Chapter 6), secondly, staircases face in only two of the cardinal directions, and thirdly the terracotta plaques and sculptures belonging to ACI denote a regular temple of worship, rather than a funerary or funerary-like monument. Lastly, as Bakker and Hardy have suggested, the description of an *aiḍūka* in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* is likely to have been schematic; essentially a theoretical idea that was never, in actuality, realised.[131]

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[126] Pal, 'The Aiḍuka', p. 50.
[127] Ibid., p. 51 for Pal's visual interpretation of the text.
[128] Ibid., p. 52.
[129] Ibid., p. 56.
[130] Ibid., p. 60.
[131] Adam Hardy, Personal Communication.

Conclusion

Chapter 5 shed light on the importance of Pañcāla and Ahichhatrā in the Early Historic period, both in terms of religion, learning and trade, but also in the public imagination, owing to the role played by the region and some of its legendary citizens in the *Mahābhārata*. Despite the importance of Pañcāla and its northern capital, however, the structural ruins at Ahichhatrā – some of which have been discussed in Chapter 6 – have received little scholarly attention. The ancient city would thus benefit from a systematic cataloguing of its architectural ruins, preferably by those who have conducted excavations at the site.

In the absence of excavation reports it is difficult to form a clear understanding of how the ACI monument would have looked in its heyday. Nevertheless, based on a thorough exploration of the structure, some tentative conclusions have been reached here; namely, that the monument was composed of a plinth (possibly a later addition) and three substantial receding terraces. Each of the platforms was wide enough to allow for circumambulation; and moreover, aside from the uppermost terrace, all of the platforms had tall corridors whose exterior walls may have been adorned with friezes and pilasters, and possibly with terracotta reliefs (in addition to the Gaṅgā and Yamunā sculptures). The surmounting temple was rectangular on plan with entrances on both the east and the west. Furthermore, the possibility has been raised that the temple was *valabhī* in design, with a barrel-vaulted roof.

Since ACI was never fully excavated, further investigations – particularly at the level of the foundations, and on the south side of the structure – could potentially prove insightful. Lastly, the dating of ACI will be discussed in Chapter 11.

Chapter 7: Ornamental Bricks from Ahichhatrā

Introduction

> I have now ascertained that many of the most famous buildings in Northern India at the time of the Muhammadan invasion must have been entirely built of brick, and were decorated with terracotta ornaments and alto-relievos. This was certainly the case with … all the Brahmanical temples of the Gupta period at Bilsar, Bhitargaon, Garhwa, and Bhitari. In the more easterly provinces of Bihar and Bengal the same causes of want and costliness of stone gave rise both to the great brick temples of Bodh-Gaya and Nalanda. Even at Mathura and Benares, within a few miles of the sandstone quarries of Rupbas and Chunar, moulded and carved bricks are found in great abundance.[1]

This chapter will explore motifs found on terracotta moulded bricks and stone carvings belonging to temples of the Gupta era. The primary focus will be on the myriad of ornamental bricks found at Ahichhatrā, some of which were gifted to the British Museum in 1901, along with bricks that were found lying at the site, and are now housed in other Indian museums or preserved for posterity in excavation photographs. These ornamental bricks will be compared with similar examples from Bhītargāon and other Gupta temples or archaeological sites. Especially relevant to this research are those sacred monuments where some moulded bricks are still *in situ*, as they will play an essential role in the development of a workable hypothesis about the original position that the Ahichhatrā bricks would have held on a temple façade.

As far as I am aware, Mohammad Zaheer is the only scholar to have written at any length on ornamental bricks of the Gupta period. He dedicates a chapter of his book, *The Temple of Bhītargāon*, to comparing ornamental bricks from various sites. He writes:

> Scant attention was paid to architectural members in burnt brick; nor was any care given to their place of origin. The places of origin and the circumstances of

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[1] Cunningham, *Report of Tours*, p. 42.

> discovery of the countless ornamental bricks in archaeological museums in India are generally unknown. This makes any attempt at comparison of the finds from one place with those of other sites extremely difficult…[2]

It is surprising that little thought appears to have been given to the preservation of many ornamental bricks at Ahichhatrā, although a small number are kept in the reserve collection of the National Museum in New Delhi. This problem adds weight to Zaheer’s complaint that ornamental bricks have not been given their due importance during excavations.[3] Nevertheless, despite the various issues which arise from not knowing the exact find spots of most of the ornamental bricks in museum collections, a sound, though incomplete comparative study is still possible.

Ornamental Bricks

Each ornamental brick or brick fragment would have formed part of a frieze, pilaster, aedicule, sculptural panel, doorjamb or *śikhara* (tower). During my first field trip in 2011, a heap of ornamental brick and figurative sculptural fragments was observed in the vicinity of the ASI campsite at Ahichhatrā. These are thought to have been left in a pile for over seventy years, if not longer, and were therefore densely covered with moss and debris.[4] As a result, they are more worn and rugged than those bricks preserved in the reserve collections at the British Museum and the National Museum in New Delhi; nevertheless, a number of valuable pieces including capitals belonging to pilasters were removed from the pile, cleaned up, measured and photographed. During the 1940s’ excavations, a few displaced capitals from ACII were photographed and bear a strong likeness to those found at the site. An educated guess, if a speculative one, would be that they might hail from the same temple. Some ornamental bricks can still be found on the terraces of ACI, albeit for the most part not in their original locations. A group of bricks, for example, were found on the second terrace, camouflaged by a layer of earth on the south side of the temple (Fig. 7.1).

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[2] Zaheer, p. 45.
[3] Ibid., p. 45.
[4] By February 2012 the pile of decorative bricks had disappeared, possibly to the site shed.

7.1. Displaced ornamental bricks on the second terrace, south side of ACI.

The British Museum fragments have evidently been selected with the intention of exhibiting as representative and concise a collection of Gupta mouldings as possible from Ahichhatrā. The high quality of many of the fragments selected is also worthy of note. The only type of fragment repeated in the collection are the upper halves of three miniature pilasters (Fig. 7.2). These are diminutive versions of block-and-roundel pilasters, which Hardy describes as being common in 'northern and southern traditions at least until the 8th century.'[5] They each have a roundel (*darpaṇa* or mirror) above which sits a bracket (*potikā*).[6] That there are three of these fragments in the British Museum collection would suggest that either these were plentiful at Ahichhatrā, or that a single temple was raided of its ornamental decor. Interestingly, I have not come across another example of a miniature terracotta pilaster in a museum collection. Originally these fragments would have flanked small niches, forming part of a continuous blind colonnade, probably containing figurative terracotta panels, and may have adorned a *jagatī* (plinth) like those on the Daśāvatāra temple at Deogaṛh (Fig. 7.3), or at Mansar, or on the Śiva temple at Bhūmarā.

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[5] Hardy, *The Temple Architecture of India,* p. 151.
[6] Adam Hardy, Personal Communication.

7.2. Pilaster fragments from Ahichhatrā *held in the reserve collections of the British Museum.*

7.3. Fragment from the Daśāvatāra temple at Deogaṛh showing miniature niches and pilasters with relief carvings of amorous couples. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

Several decorative bricks – mostly from ACI and ACII – were photographed during the 1940-44 excavations and are kept in the ASI photo archives in New Delhi. The current location of most of the bricks photographed is not known, although it is hoped that some may be kept in the Central Antiquity Collection of the ASI in the Purana Qila.[7] The bricks from the smaller temple at ACII are on the whole, more ornate and

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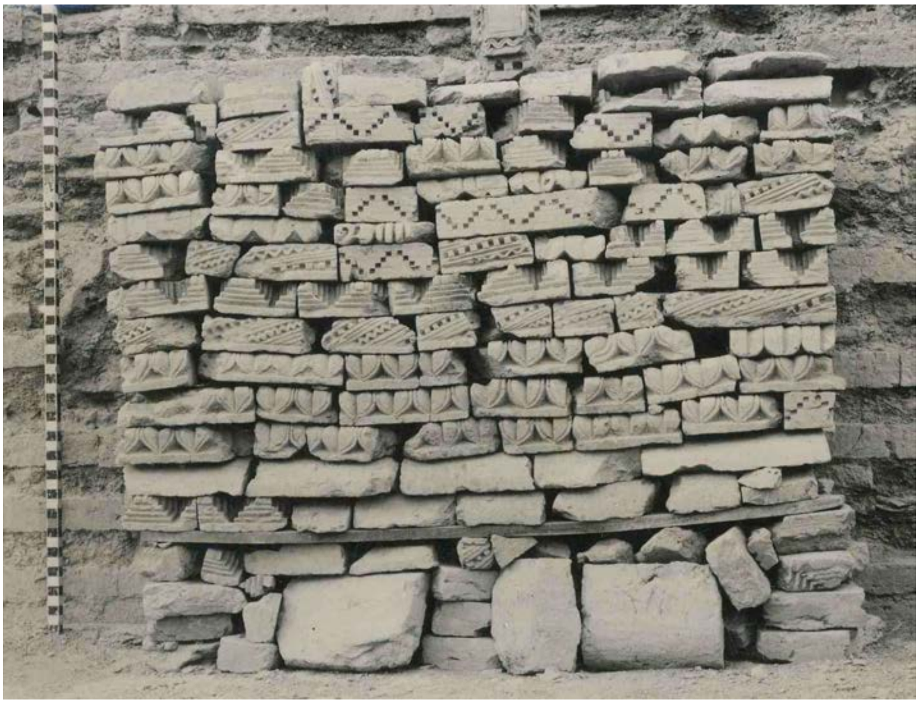
[7] My hope is that many of the terracottas and stone sculptures catalogued by Agrawala are in the Central Antiquity Collection (CAC) in the Purana Qila. Although I visited the CAC to try and establish the whereabouts of the missing bricks and sculptures, the staff needed more time to search for the artefacts than the remainder of my trip allowed.

replete with artistic flourishes and complex geometric designs than those found at ACI, which fit predominantly into four types, exemplified by an archival photograph showing a stack of bricks from the southern façade of the monument (Fig. 7.4). Incidentally, some of the motifs on the ornamental brick and frieze fragments from ACII are reminiscent of those from the Devnimori *stūpa* in Gujarat, dating to *circa* the third quarter of the fourth century CE. This might tentatively indicate a similarly early date for the construction of ACII.



7.4. Stack of decorative bricks from ACI photographed during 1940s excavations. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

Between the ornamental bricks found at Ahichhatrā, the twenty-five from the British Museum, the five at the National Museum in Delhi, the one at the Allahabad Museum and those photographed during the excavations, a whole range of delightful and intricate though bold motifs can be observed consisting of floral mouldings, chequered panels, ornate capitals, lotus petal friezes, loops, ropes, *gavākṣas*, a pedestal and dentils (Fig. 7.5). Some of the fragments are more finely modelled than others. Indeed, a number of the bricks carry particularly complex patterns which would have demanded skill and experience to execute, such as the geometric *svastika* motif brick from ACII built into a Greek key-like composition. A small but fantastic fragment also from ACII depicts a *sarpa-bandha* (entwined snakes) (Fig. 7.6). The head and mouth of one of the snakes has survived and the panel is further embellished with fragmented floral motifs.

7.5. Bricks from ACII photographed during 1940s excavations. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

A series of different techniques have been used to create the terracotta designs, such as carving, moulding, stamping and incising shallow lines and patterns. The high level of uniformity found in these fragments is surprising in this medium and reflects well on the skill of the craftsmen, but it is in the little errors – the occasional wobbly line, for example – that the delightful spontaneity of terracotta work is most apparent. These characteristics lend a folk quality to the medium and are evocative of the craftsmen and women.

Though regional differences are evident, most, though not all, of the motifs from the decorative bricks found at Ahichhatrā can be seen with minor variations at other Gupta temple sites including Kasiā, Sārnāth, Śrāvastī, Bhitari, Pawāyā, Newal (Navadevakula) and most noticably at Bhītargāon (Fig. 7.7).[8] Lithographs of terracottas in Cunningham's *Report of Tours in the Gangetic Provinces from Badaon to Bihar in 1875-76 and 1877-78* depict ornamental bricks from Newal, located on the *Uttarāpatha*, 32 km southwest of Kannauj, next to the city of Bangarmau in the

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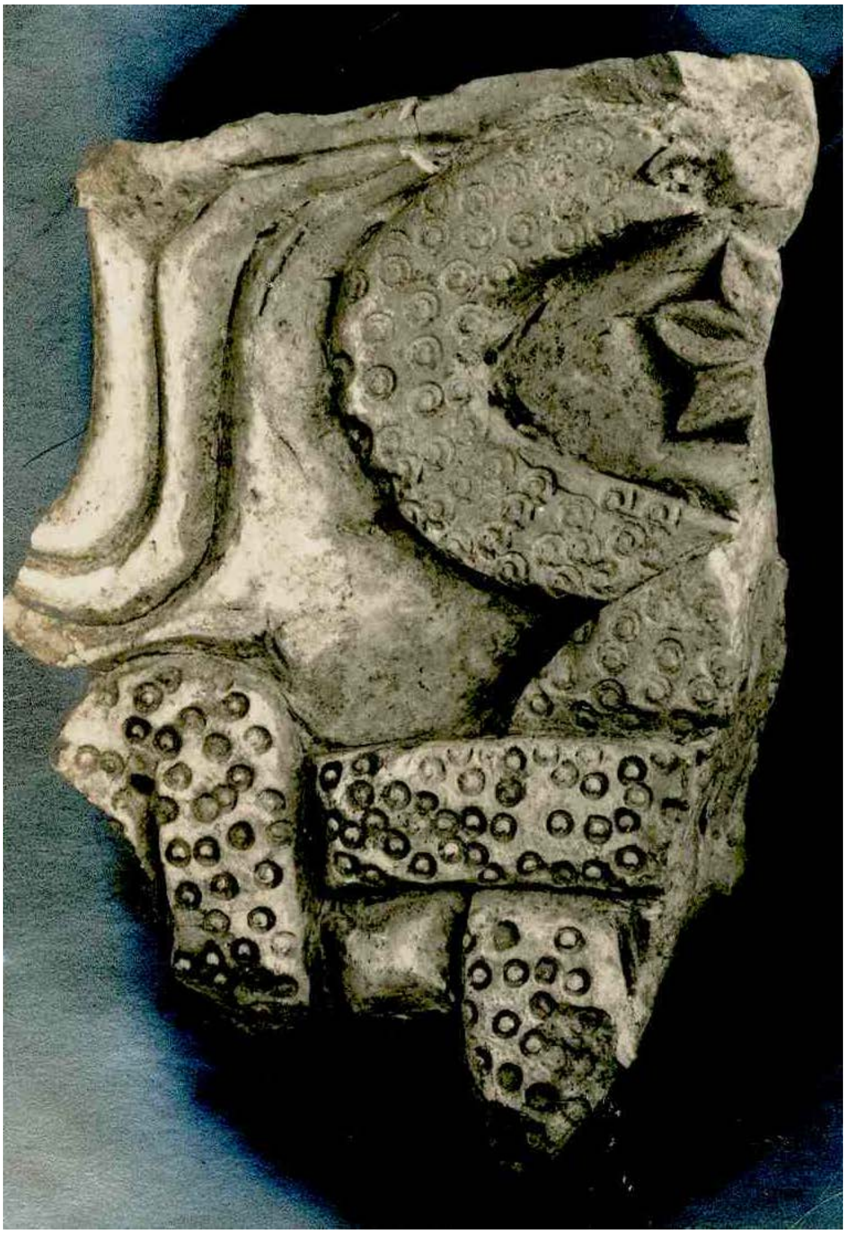
[8] Zaheer, p. 50.

Unnao District of Uttar Pradesh. The bricks include a square acanthus abacus, exactly like the ones found at Ahichhatrā, a semi-circular petalled *ghaṭa* similar to those on the pilasters at Bhītargāon, and a *makara* plaque bordered on one side by an ornamental vertical panel bearing a leaf motif (Fig. 7.8).[9] The latter plaque, which is kept in the reserve collections of the British Museum, is strikingly like those *in situ* on the walls of the Bhītargāon temple.



7.6. Sarpa-bandha fragment from ACII. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

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[9] Cunningham, *Report of Tours*, Plate XVIII.

7.7. Detail of the Bhītargāon temple showing a series of ornamental bands and friezes.

7.8. A terracotta makara plaque from Newal dating to the Gupta or post-Gupta period. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

Zaheer made a study of one hundred and twenty bricks from Ahichhatrā and found that one hundred and thirteen of these had parallels at Bhītargāon.[10] This makes it

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[10] Zaheer, p. 55.

possible to build up a convincing hypothesis about the original location on a temple of the fragments in question.

Interestingly, a drawing of a pilaster and ornamental bands from the drum of the brick and terracotta *stūpa* at Ṭhūl Mīr Rūkan (Nawabshah District of Sind, Pakistan) resemble in style the pilaster and frieze fragments from Ahichhatrā and Bhītargāon (Fig. 7.9 and 7.10).[11] The acanthus capital at Ṭhūl Mīr Rūkan, for example, is remarkably similar in execution to the capitals from Ahichhatrā, despite being situated over a thousand kilometers apart.

7.9. Brick Ṭhūl Mīr Rūkan stūpa, Nawabshah District of Sind, Pakistan. Photograph taken in 1875. Courtesy of the British Library.

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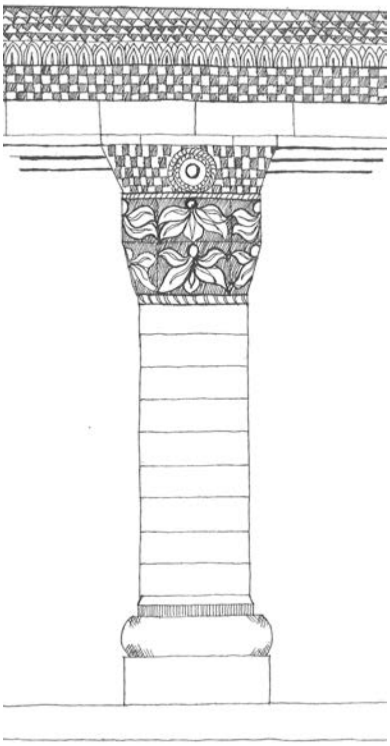
[11] See J. E. Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, 'Pre-Muslim Antiquities of Sind', in *South Asian Archaeology 1975: Papers from the Third International Conference of the Association of South Asian Archaeologists in Western Europe Held in Paris*, ed. by J. E. Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw (Brill: 1970) pp. 151-174 (p. 158).



7.10. A pilaster on the Ṭhūl Mīr Rūkan stūpa.[12]

Owing to the nature of the material, the paradox between the earthy and the graceful in Gupta sculpture is most evident in terracotta art, which was, as M. K. Dhavalikar notes: 'produced on a scale hitherto unknown' during the Gupta period and 'as in stone sculpture, in terracotta art also the artist attained a degree of perfection never reached before or after in India'.[13] This last comment is of course subjective, although on the whole it is quite evident that terracotta modelling blossoms and matures following the Kuṣāṇa period, becoming transformed into a medium that can on occasion rival stone sculpture for beauty and grace. During the Gupta period the production of both terracotta sculpture and various architectural elements was approached with a vigour and enthusiasm noticable even in the brick motifs from Ahichhatrā. The variations found in these otherwise often standard designs lend the bricks a liveliness and a charm. This variety is due to a number of obvious factors such as region, skill, and presumably date, but one also gets the impression that there was room for artistic experimentation within the limitations of the motifs. Even within a single archaeological site, different interpretations of a popular design can be found.

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[12] Figure 7.10 is based on a drawing by Lohuizen-de Leeuw, p. 158 (Fig. 2).

[13] M. K. Dhavalikar, *Masterpieces of Indian Terracottas* (Bombay: Taraporevala, 1977), p. 39.

From Ahichhatrā, for example, there are two fragments belonging to separate lotus petal friezes (7.11). This common design is invariably found on all Gupta and Vākāṭaka temples, usually around doorways, *candraśālās* and along friezes. Both of the fragments in question have been rendered differently; in the first example, the petals have been moulded with a deep and curvaceous arch, while the second example is relatively geometric in design. Both the consistency and the variety found in these bricks will be explored later in this chapter. Interestingly, the former brick is held at the British Museum and is identical to those photographed from ACI.

7.11. Bricks from lotus petal friezes. The brick on the right is held in the reserve collections of the British Museum, and the brick on the left was found in a pile at Ahichhatrā in 2011.

It should be noted that while many ornamental bricks from the Gupta and Vākāṭaka periods share a similar 'vocabulary', there are exceptions to this rule – for example, the tiles from the apsidal fifth century *caitya* at Harwan near Srinigar in modern day Kashmir. These figurative and ornamental brick tiles are housed in several international collections including the British Museum, the Ashmolean, the V&A, the Cleveland Museum and the Musée Guimet. The tiles depict images of geese, pots with foliage, deers, dancers, naked long-haired ascetics with sunken eyes, archers on horseback in the Parthian style, hunting scenes, congregations, *stūpas* and ornamental motifs stamped into the clay in low relief. They are inscribed with numbers written in the Kharoṣṭhī script instructing the order in which the tiles should be positioned.[14] These tiles formed the floor and bench risers of the circular courtyard adjoining the *caitya*. Influences from Gandhāra are in evidence in the motifs here, and based on the iconography it is thought that the tiles may have been produced for the ascetic Ājīvika sect.[15] Stylistically they have nothing in common with the type of ornamental bricks found at Ahichhatrā. Similar stamped tiles have been found at various other sites in

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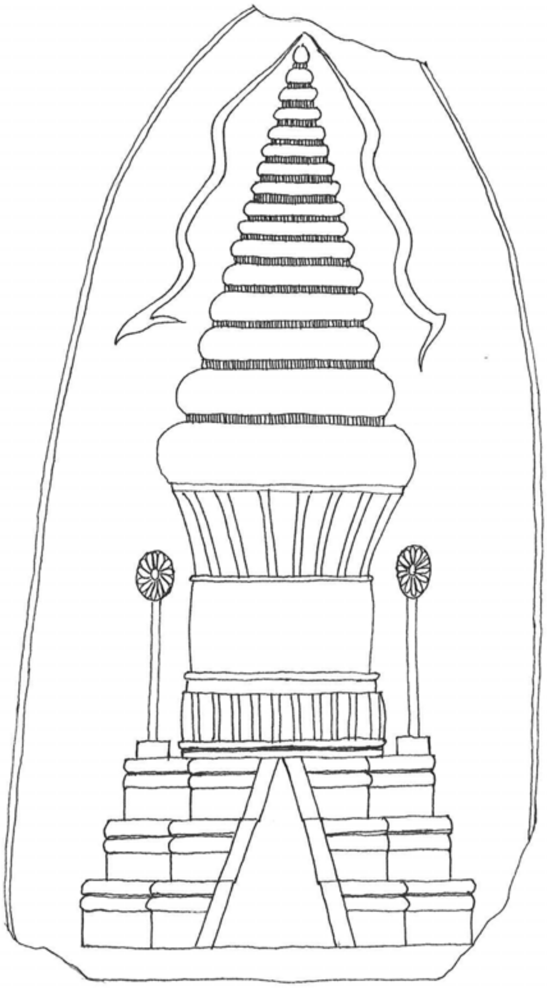
[14] Andrew Topsfield, 'Saints and Sadhus', *In the Realm of Gods and Kings, Arts of India*, ed. by Andrew Topsfield (London: Philip Wilson, 2013, 1st edn 2004), pp. 190-212 (p. 193).

[15] Ibid., p. 193.

Kashmir, including at Semthan, Hutmora, Kutbal and Ushkur.[16] As explored in an earlier chapter, tiles from Harwan depicting *stūpas* situated atop triple-tiered platforms are of particular interest (Fig. 7.12). The ornamental brickwork and friezes from a number of other early monuments such as the Mīrpur Khās *stūpa* in Sind are stylistically very different from the bricks and frieze fragments from Ahichhatrā, but some of the motifs are the same or similar. A fabulous tile from Mīrpur Khās depicting the characterful head of a lion, for instance, is an image found on many temples of the Gupta era (Fig. 7.13).[17]



7.12. Drawing of a stūpa depicted on one of the terracotta tiles from Harwan, Kashmir.

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[16] Pratapaditya Pal, 'Faith and Form: Religious Sculpture in Ancient Kashmir', in *The Arts of Kashmir*, ed. by Pratapaditya Pal (New York: Asia Society, 2007), pp. 60-100 (p. 66).

[17] Zaheer writes that out of the 16 published examples of decorative bricks from Mīrpur Khās, only two of the bricks are of a type found at Bhītargāon. These include a fragment of lotus petal frieze with chequers, and an acanthus motif brick (see Zaheer, p. 48).

7.13. Terracotta tile from Mīrpur Khās. Photograph courtesy of the Huntington Archive.

Motifs at Ahichhatrā

The purpose of the final part of this chapter is to create a 'vocabulary' of motifs from Ahichhatrā, and to relate them to corresponding motifs found at other Gupta and Vākāṭaka temple sites. This exercise will enable us to develop an understanding of where the Ahichhatrā fragments might have been positioned on a monument. Moreover, the historical trajectory of these ornamental motifs will be briefly explored, insofar as is possible given the space allowed. This is not a conclusive vocabulary of Gupta ornamentation; there must have been a multitude of decorative brick types at Ahichhatrā which have either not survived the passage of time, or have not been recorded; and there are certainly many more terracotta motifs to be found at other locations. Lastly, it is evident that, as with many other aspects of Indian iconography, the motifs explored here transcend cultural and religious boundaries.

Pilaster Motifs

Acanthus

7.14. Brick from a pilaster capital from ACII. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

The acanthus leaf motif is found on terracotta moulded pilaster capitals from Ahichhatrā, and especially those hailing from ACII (Figs. 7.14 to 7.18). This motif has a long and illustrious history and was used to great effect in the Hellenistic world where it ornamented Corinthian column capitals, various other architectural elements, household artifacts and jewellery. At around the same time (*c.* 3rd century BCE) this motif was used in the ancient Greco-Bactrian city of Aï Khanoum founded by Alexander the Great in northern Afghanistan. Indeed, one hundred and eight columns with Corinthian capitals were situated to either side of the palace forecourt here.[18] A striking early Kuṣāṇa period limestone frieze from Airtam in Uzbekistan, housed in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, depicts musicians playing several different instruments. Only the upper bodies of the musicians are portrayed, rising above a frieze of acanthus leaves. The acanthus motif also flanks each of the figures. Similarly ornate frieze or pilaster fragments depicting acanthus motifs interwoven with figures and fruits were found at Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan (Fig. 7.19).

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[18] S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment, Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 79-80.

7.15. Pilaster fragments from ACII. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

Prolific use was made of this motif in Gandhāra, again more often than not on ornament pilaster capitals. It is probable that it was from this region that the acanthus motif was popularised across parts of the subcontinent. A well-executed fragment of a frieze from the fourth century Devnimori *stūpa*, depicting an acanthus motif, is kept in the Department of Archaeology, M. S. University in Baroda.[19] During the Gupta period the acanthus leaf is also depicted on the *potikā* of pilasters at Bhītargāon, and on pilaster fragments from Pawāyā. It should be noted that at the latter three sites, the acanthus is no longer the spectacular three-dimensional motif we find in Hellenistic and Gandhāran art, or even on the Kṣatrapa *stūpa* at Devnimori, but rather it has become embedded into the architectural members.

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[19] See Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, Plate 120.

7.16. Terracotta fragment from a pilaster capital found at Ahichhatrā, measuring 13.2 x 25.5 x 15.4 cm.

7.17. Side view of pilaster capital found at Ahichhatrā.

7.18. Pilaster or frieze fragment from ACI. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

7.19. Pilaster or frieze fragments from Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan, dating to the 2nd or 3rd century CE. Musée Guimet.

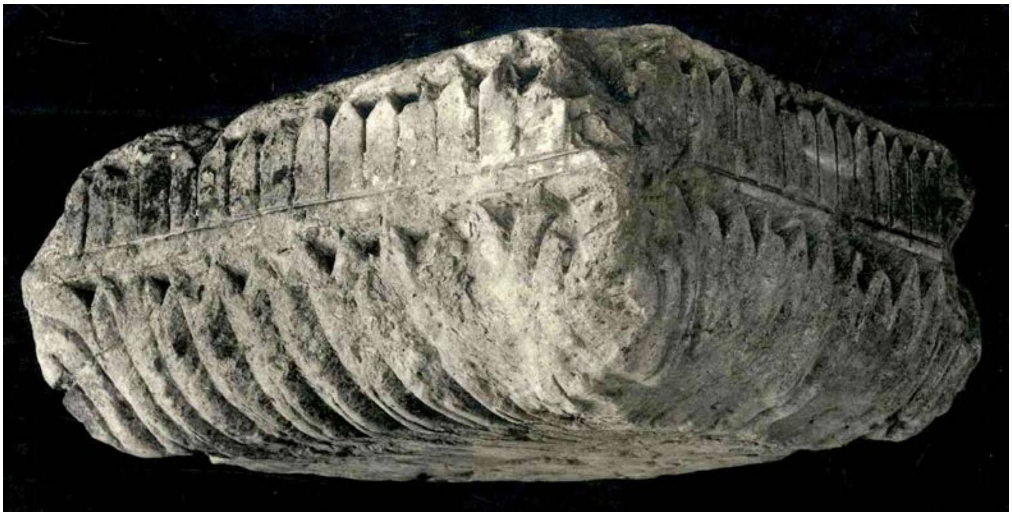
Ribbed or Petalled Motif

7.20. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

At least eight substantial pilaster fragments from Ahichhatrā bear a moulded or carved ribbed design, most probably a derivative of the *āmalaka* motif (Figs. 7.20 to 7.23). Moreover, the sole pilaster fragment still *in situ* on the facade of ACI bears this motif. At Bhītargāon, this motif is found on the *kumbha* and the *ghaṭa* of the pilasters. The pillar *ghaṭas* at Nāchnā, Eraṇ, Bhūmarā, Panna and Deogaṛh share this form, while the *ghaṭas* belonging to the pilasters flanking the entrance to Cave 6 at Udayagiri are also ribbed.

7.21. Terracotta fragment found at Ahichhatrā measuring 12.5 x 12.5 x 16 cm.

7.22. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā housed in the reserve collections of the National Museum in New Delhi.



7.23. Ornamental brick fragment from ACII. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

Triangular Motif

Triangular motifs are used frequently on frieze and pilaster fragments from Ahichhatrā, often for additional embellishment, rather than as the central motif (Figs. 7.24 and 7.25). Although it might have lost its significance by the Gupta period, this motif appears to have had its origins in wooden architecture. This is one of the most popular motifs found in Gandhāran art. Numerous relief panels depicting *caityas*, for example, supply downward pointing triangular 'fringes' beneath the eaves of the temples.

7.24. Terracotta fragment found at Ahichhatrā measuring 12.8 x 19.8 x 19.8 cm.

7.25. Terracotta frieze fragment found at Ahichhatrā measuring 8 x 16.2 x 18.4 cm.

Svastika Motif

A pilaster fragment from Ahichhatrā ACII, photographed by the ASI during the 1940s excavations, depicts a complex interlocking *svastika*, while a second carved brick fragment from the same monument depicts an encircled *svastika* surrounded by palmettes (Figs. 7.26 and 7.27). Moreover, several potsherds apparently dating from *circa* 100 to 350 CE and illustrated in a paper by A. Ghosh and K. C. Panigrahi (1946) depict this motif.[20] Also from Ahichhatrā, the disc shaped earring belonging to a beautiful terracotta head of Pārvatī from ACI, attributed to the Gupta period, is embellished with a *svastika*.

This symbol, which has many names in other traditions, has an ancient and widespread history. For example, it features frequently in the art of the Etruscans, Minoans, ancient Greeks and Romans and is depicted on Indus Valley seals possibly dating as far back as 2500 BCE.[21] This symbol is found in the Buddhist art of Gandhāra and was said to be the first of the auspicious signs depicted on the *Buddhapāda* (footprint of the Buddha).[22] A tile from Mīrpur Khās dating to the Gupta period bears consecutive *svastika* symbols moulded in high relief. However, it must be noted that, based on extant visual evidence, the possibility exists that during this

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[20] Ghosh and Panigrahi, pp. 52-53.

[21] Meher McArthur, *Reading Buddhist Art, An Illustrated Guide to Buddhist Signs and Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004, 1st edn 2002), p. 129.

[22] Ibid., p. 129.

period Brahmanism had not yet widely embraced the *svastika*. It might indicate that Buddhist influences on the Hindu art and architecture of Ahichhatrā were particularly strong.

7.26. Ornamental brick pilaster fragment from ACII. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

7.27. Ornamental brick frieze fragment from ACII. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

Miniature Pilasters

7.28. Pilaster fragment from Ahichhatrā measuring 17.5 x 19.2 x 6 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, three terracotta fragments from Ahichhatrā representing miniature pilasters are housed in the reserve collections of the British Museum (Figs. 7.28 to 7.30). Their findspot is not known. Diminutive representations of Corinthian columns are frequently depicted in relief panels from Gandhāra, and on friezes adorning the walls of Gandhāran *stūpas*. At early Buddhist sites such as Kanganhalli in Karnataka, small pilasters carved in relief are used to frame narrative panels. They also appear in depictions of Buddhist railings. Besides this, miniature pilasters are found on a few stone temples of the Gupta period, for example, on the *jagatī* at Deogaṛh. Here they frame figurative relief carvings depicting amorous *mithuna* pairs. Numerous fragments from the Śiva temple at Bhūmarā, on display at the State Museum in Allahabad, depict nude *gaṇa* figures sandwiched between pilasters. Punctuating each of these miniature aedicules is either an empty keyhole niche or a floral motif. The *jagatī* of the late sixth century stone temple at Gop, near the village of Jinawari in Gujarat, is adorned with a band of miniature pilasters interspersed with niches containing figurative relief carvings. Based on these examples, the Ahichhatrā fragments were most probably situated in blind colonnades either on the *jagatī*, or on the superstructure of a temple. Moreover, they would have framed figurative or ornamental reliefs, or even empty niches, demonstrated by the fragments of elegantly shaped keyhole niches surviving on either end of two of the British Museum pilasters.

7.29. Pilaster fragment from Ahichhatrā measuring 17.5 x 13.7 x 4.5 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

7.30. Pilaster fragment from Ahichhatrā measuring 22.5 x 22 x 6 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

Frieze Motifs

Floral Frieze

7.31. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā measuring 9.4 x 19.2 x 5 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

Three terracotta frieze fragments from Ahichhatrā held at the British Museum depict four-petalled flowers set within squares (Figs. 7.31 to 7.33). Similar friezes depicting flowers with either four or five petals are depicted in reliefs from Bhārhut (*c.* 2nd-1st century BCE), Amarāvatī (*c.* 1st-2nd century CE), Nāgārjunakoṇḍa (*c.* 2nd-3rd century CE) and Kanganhalli (1st-3rd century CE) in the south, and from Gandhāra (*c.* 1st-5th century CE) in the north. This motif is also utilized on the magnificent ivory carvings from Begram in Afghanistan, dating between the first and second centuries CE. Its popularity continued in the Gupta and Vākāṭaka periods. A floral frieze flanked by beading runs along a doorjamb at Deogaṛh, while the doorway at Tigowā is surrounded by two continuous rows of the four-petalled flower motif. At the same temple, two rows depicting this motif are also situated beneath pillar capitals. Bands bearing a four-petalled flower motif set within squares are situated on either side of the entrance to Temple 17 at Sāñcī. Vertical panels between each small figurative niche at the Vākāṭaka Bhogarāma temple in Ramtek depict a floral motif with five petals. As at Deogaṛh, the panels are flanked by beading. Short panels situated between some of the *makara* plaques on the Bhītargāon temple bear a continuous floral motif but the design is convoluted and far removed from the Ahichhatrā fragments. Interestingly, the depiction of the floral motif at Ahichhatrā is considerably closer in style to those examples from Amarāvatī, Kanganhalli and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, than to the Gupta period examples, with the exception of those at the Tigowā temple and Temple 17 at Sāñcī. One of the Ahichhatrā fragments at the British Museum was probably part of vertical frieze (Fig. 7.33). It incorporates the floral motif into a more elaborate arrangement. The flowers with four petals are each flanked by projecting pyramids, while the central square portrays a disc or flower with six petals.

7.32. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā measuring 16.5 x 11 x 5.7 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

7.33. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā measuring 14.8 x 12.4 x 6.4 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

Stepped Pyramidal Motif

7.34. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā ACV housed in the reserve collections of the National Museum in New Delhi.

Several fragments depicting a stepped pyramidal motif in high relief survive from Ahichhatrā, both at the site and in the collections at the British Museum and at the National Museum in New Delhi (Figs. 7.34 and 7.35). The motif resembles an upside down *stūpa* or pyramidal monument, while the negative space creates a pyramidal motif facing upwards; it should be noted, however, that this motif is not necessarily intended to be symbolic, and may just have been considered a pleasing design. The motif is found in low relief on architectural fragments from early Buddhist *stūpas* such as at Bhārhut. Here the motif faces upwards. Similarly an upward facing stepped pyramidal frieze motif is depicted in low relief on Cave 12 at Ajaṇṭā, excavated between 100 BCE and 100 CE. During the Gupta period this motif is depicted in high relief, in bands around the wall of the Bhītargāon temple and beneath the *śikhara*, and we can imagine that the Ahichhatrā fragments might have performed such a function.

7.35. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā measuring 12.2 x 7 x 6.3 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

7.36. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā measuring 15.4 x 24.2 x 8.5 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

7.37. Ornamental brick fragment from ACI. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

An inverse form of this motif is also found on several fragments from Ahichhatrā housed at the British Museum, displaced at the site, and preserved in post-excavation photographs (Figs. 7.36 to 7.38). It is also found at Bhītargāon, and, like the stepped motif in high relief, it runs in a frieze around the temple walls. This motif is also found elsewhere, for example, in a band to either side of a *gavākṣa* fragment from the Govind Dev temple in Vrindavan, housed in the Government Museum in Mathurā (Fig. 7.39). As an aside, the peculiar hairstyle worn by the male figure in the *gavākṣa* fragment, is also sported by a male figure in a terracotta plaque from Mīrpur Khās (Fig. 7.40), and on characters at Deogaṛh. It might be tentatively suggested, then, that they all date to the late Gupta period.

7.38. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā measuring 12 x 13 x 8.7 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

7.39. Stone gavākṣa fragment from the Govind Dev temple in Vrindavan, housed in the Government Museum in Mathurā.

7.40. A terracotta plaque from Mīrpur Khās depicting a male devotee, or possibly Padmapāṇi. Courtesy of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai.

Lion Heads

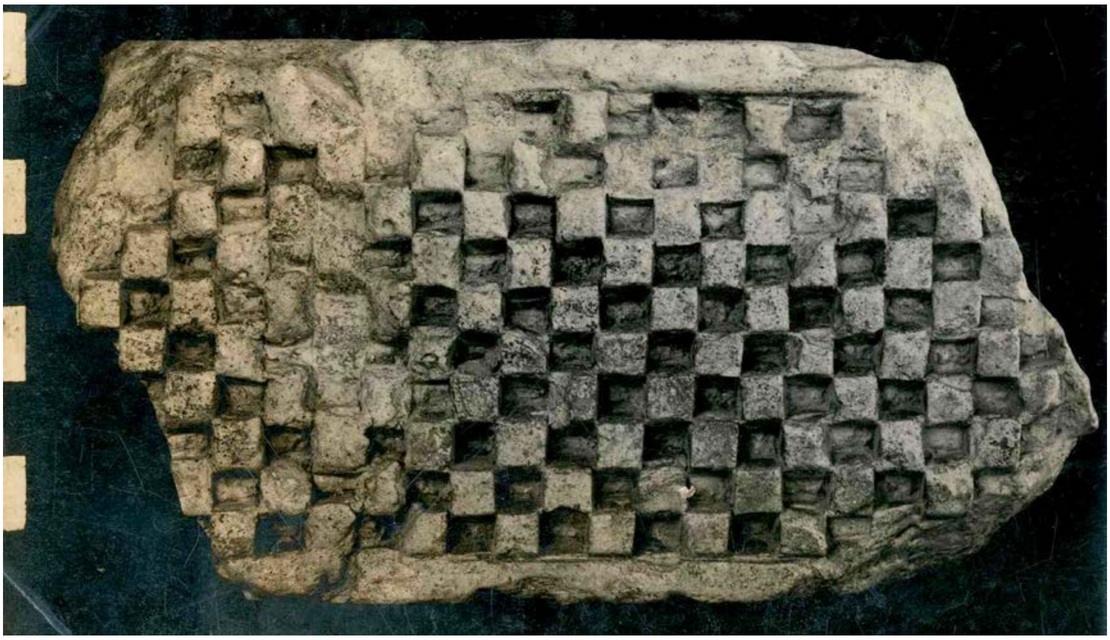
7.41. Ornamental brick fragment from ACII. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

A frieze fragment depicting lion heads is preserved in a photograph from the 1940s excavations at Ahichhatrā (Fig. 7.41). The fragment was found on ACII, and only the small upturned ears, bushy eyebrows, protruding closed eyes, and a fragment of a whisker have survived. The one and a half extant heads are spaced several centimeters apart, probably within dentils.

Lion heads were widely represented in the ancient architecture of the Greek and Roman Empires. In particular, they were often employed as water spouts on classical Greek, Hellenistic and Roman temples. Lion head spouts are found, for instance, on the Acropolis in Athens, on the Greek temple of Jupiter-Baal in Lebanon and on the Roman temple at Selinunte in Sicily. Lion heads feature on *stūpa* friezes from Taxila: for example, above blind colonnades at Butkarā *stūpas* 14 and 17, and at the Dharmarājika complex (*c*. 1st century BCE-1st Century CE). In all cases the lion heads are not situated within dentils, but rather they are punctuated alternately by motifs, such as palmettes, eagles, lotus flowers or representations of architectural members including miniature pilasters. As mentioned previously, the lion head motif is found on numerous temples of the Gupta and Vākāṭaka periods, such as above the door lintel and on the superstructure at Maṛhiā. Here they are depicted within dentils set in rows and spaced slightly apart from one another. Lion head dentils are depicted above the door lintel of the Śiva temple at Sakor, and above the door lintel at Deogaṛh. At the latter temple they are also situated above the large niches on the outer walls of the temple. The delicately carved lion heads on Cave 19 at Ajaṇṭā are each touching one another, rather than being spaced apart as on the aforementioned Gupta temples. Here, the row of lion heads form part of miniature aedicules on the superstructure, and in this context, represent door lintels. It might be suggested, then, that the Ahichhatrā fragment may have been located above the door lintel of the lost shrine at ACII, or in a frieze along its superstructure. The door lintel of Cave 6 at Udayagiri is the most stylistically comparable to the Ahichhatrā fragment, insofar as the dentils are integrated with a stepped pyramidal motif; however, the dentils at the latter temple are ornamented with human heads.

Chequered Motif

At least seven fragments from Ahichhatrā depict a chequered motif (Figs. 7.42 to 7.47). This pattern is found on several Gupta and Vākāṭaka era temples. At Bhītargāon, for example, vertical chequered panels frame *makara* reliefs. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, Beglar's photographs of Bhītargāon (1878) indicate that these vertical panels originally bore figurative and floral relief mouldings. The chequered panels, then, are reproductions used to replace lost panels. The chequered motif borders scenes from the Buddha's life on an exuberant pair of stone pilaster fragments found at Swāmighat in Mathurā.[23] At Mīrpur Khās, the terracotta Buddha images situated in niches around the base of the *stūpa* had chequered frames. At Nāchnā, chequered panels are situated above *dvārapālas* (guardian figures) on the doorjambs of the temple. This motif embellishes many architectural fragments from Darrā: for example, on the doorjambs and on a lintel fragment. Doorjamb fragments from Bhūmarā also bear this motif in delineated panels. The superstructure of Cave 19 at Ajaṇṭā has chequered panels situated between miniature pilasters, while Cave 20 has chequered panels on its doorjambs. It is possible that this motif is sometimes employed to represent lattice windows, such as those in the walls of the Pārvatī temple at Nāchnā. Incidentally, a stone relief carving from Gandhāra illustrating the *Great Renunciation* depicts fretwork dormer windows at either end of a barrel-vaulted roof. Moreover, one of the ivory fragments from Begram housed in the Musée Guimet depicts two women standing casually in an arched doorway, with a grate or window above their heads in the same chequered or lattice arrangement (Fig. 7.48).



7.42. Ornamental brick fragment from ACII. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

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[23] Photographs of the pilasters are reproduced in Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, Plate 71.

7.43. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā measuring 17.6 x 13.5 x 6 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

7.44. Terracotta fragment from the border of a plaque found at Ahichhatrā. Measures 15.4 x 18.7 x 12.8 cm.

7.45. Ornamental brick pilaster fragment from ACII. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

7.46. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā measuring 10 x 13 x 5.7 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

7.47. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā measuring 13.5 x 17.1 x 6 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

7.48. Ivory carving from Begram housed in the Musée Guimet.

Lotus Petal Motif

As noted earlier in this chapter, a terracotta fragment of a lotus petal frieze from Ahichhatrā is housed at the British Museum, while I came across other fragments at the site. In the 1940s, the ASI also photographed several more ornamental bricks with this motif (Figs. 7.49 to 7.52). The lotus petal frieze is almost ubiquitous on Indian temple architecture through the ages, although it is not found widely on pre-Gupta relief sculpture and architecture. At Kanganhalli, at least two pilasters depicted on large stone relief panels are ornamented with lotus petal friezes. Similarly, they encircle the footing and capitals of pillars and pilasters from Amarāvatī. During the Gupta period we find the motif under the *kapota* at the base of the superstructure at Maṛhiā, while this motif runs both above and below the *ghaṭa* on the pillars and pilasters at Tigowā. At Deogaṛh, lotus petal friezes are situated along the doorjambs, and at Bhītargāon this motif is used profusely; here, we find it running in a frieze above the pilasters, and also framing every niche on the *śikhara* of the temple. Several lotus petal fragments survive from Pawāyā but not *in situ*. At the Vākāṭaka Bhogarāma temple and at the Kevala-Narasiṃha temple, both in Ramtek, this motif runs in friezes above and below a series of niches. On the seventh century pyramidal temple at Aphṣāḍ, a lotus petal frieze runs along the *jagatī*, while the motif also adorns the bases of the stucco pilasters.

7.49. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā measuring 12 x 14.6 x 6.5 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

7.50. Same as Fig. 7.49 but from above. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

7.51. Terracotta fragment found at Ahichhatrā measuring 5.8 x 22 x 20.3 cm.

7.52. Displaced ornamental brick on the south side of ACI at Ahichhatrā

Saw Tooth Motif

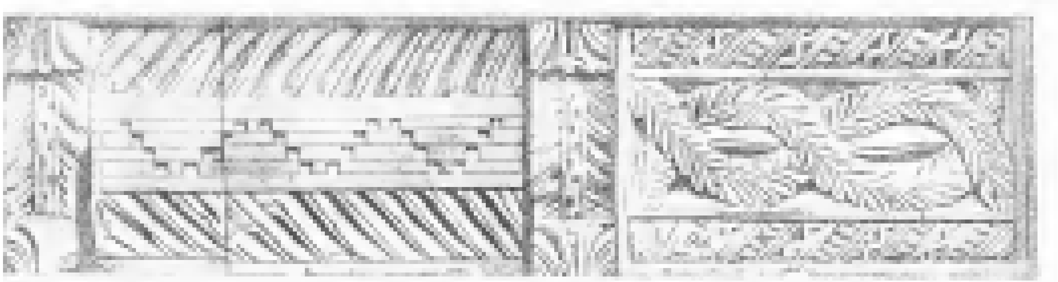
Two fragments from Ahichhatrā bear an incised saw tooth (criss cross) motif. The first, from ACII, is preserved in a 1940s ASI photograph (Fig. 7.53). It consists of a wide border decorated with the criss cross motif and with a row of tulips in the lower register. The second fragment is in the reserve collections of the British Museum. Here, the criss cross motif is depicted running in a frieze above one of the miniature pilasters. Variations on this design are used to adorn friezes in relief panels from Gandhāra. During the Gupta period, this motif is elegantly depicted on a border around a window on the Pārvatī temple at Nāchnā, where the criss cross pattern is so densely compacted that it resembles snakeskin. This motif is also situated beneath *candraśālās* on a pillar capital at Tigowā.

7.53. Ornamental brick fragment from ACII. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

Loops

7.54. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā measuring 19 x 23 x 4.5 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

A relatively intricate terracotta fragment from Ahichhatrā housed in the British Museum probably formed a vertical panel, adjoining a figurative or ornamental horizontal plaque (Fig. 7.54). Above the panel runs a frieze bearing the stepped pyramidal motif in low relief. The panel depicts a loop or figure of eight motif. Beside this is a vertical row of intersected triangles. Incidentally, an ornamental fragment from ACII photographed by the ASI is quite similar in that it is composed of a frieze fragment beneath the stepped pyramidal motif in low relief; below this is the upper segment of a horizontal relief panel depicting a vegetal motif, beside which there is a vertical panel with a chequered motif in high relief bordered on the left by a vertical row of triangles. Hence, it is worth tentatively suggesting that the British Museum fragment also hails from ACII. Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, ACII had already been partially excavated by Führer two decades prior to this fragment entering the collection of the British Museum, thus, the possibility exists that ornamental bricks and sculptures were removed from the monument in the late nineteenth century, and sold or passed on. Lastly, a terracotta panel from Pakna-Bihar also bears a figure of eight motif, though this time formed from laurel-like wreaths (Fig. 7.55).



7.55. A terracotta panel from Pakna-Bihar.[24]

Ropes

Several ornamental bricks from Ahichhatrā depict rows of zigzags, stripes and blocks in a diagonal formation, probably representing twisted rope (Figs. 7.56 to 7.59). Variations on this common motif are found on many temple facades and relief carvings from the early period onwards.

To an extent, the Ahichhatrā fragments crudely recall the elegant garlands frequently represented in early Buddhist art (at Amarāvatī and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, for instance), borne by male figures or sometimes dwarfs. In Gandhāran relief sculpture a type of motif closer to that of the Ahichhatrā fragments crops up occasionally, sometimes representing a roof lintel. In some of the ivory fragments from Begram this motif is depicted carved onto the sides of beds; it is conceivable that these images may have been an imitation of wooden furniture. A motif exactly like that found at

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[24] This lithograph is published in Cunningham, *Report of Tours*, Plate XVII.

Ahichhatrā is depicted on a *caitya* arch or *candraśālā* from the *stūpa* at Devnimori.[25] At Bhītargāon, this motif is depicted on the 'cushions' beneath the *ghaṭas* of the pilasters. Unlike at Bhītargāon, though, the Ahichhatrā bricks lack curvature. At Nāchnā, this type of motif is beautifully rendered on a semicircular frieze to either side of the doorway. Likewise, a frieze depicting this motif frames the doorway of Cave 6 at Udayagiri (Fig. 2.4). At Darrā a garland-like ring bearing this motif cushions the base of an *āmalasāraka* fragment.

7.56. Ornamental brick fragment from the west face of ACI. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

7.57. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā measuring 8.8 x 16.7 x 8 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

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[25] See Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, Plate 118.

7.58. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā housed in the reserve collections of the National Museum in New Delhi.

7.59. Ornamental brick fragment from Ahichhatrā ACI housed in the reserve collections of the National Museum in New Delhi.

Candraśālās

A brick from Ahichhatrā in the State Museum, Allahabad, has a small *candraśālā* (also known as *gavākṣa*) affixed to one of its narrow ends (Fig. 7.60). The *candraśālā* consists of a circular frame with one surviving 'ear' in the form of a *makara* head. Peering out through the 'window' is a human head, possibly female, although the stubble-like surface of the chin suggests that it might be a male. As Hardy elucidates, the *gavākṣa* or *candraśālā* has its roots in wooden architecture, and, in particular, in structures with barrel-vaulted roofs that have horseshoe shaped gables.[26] This type of structure is depicted in the relief carvings at early Buddhist sites such as those at Amarāvatī, Kanganhalli, Bhārhut and Sāñcī.[27] The narrative reliefs illustrate buildings, often multi-storied, with dormer windows out of which faces peer.

Candraśālās feature on almost all temples of the Gupta and Vākāṭaka periods, usually spaced evenly along roll cornices (*kapotas*), on door lintels, or on the superstructure of a temple. As mentioned in a previous chapter, photographs taken in 1878 show damaged *candraśālās* along the two *kapotas* of the temple at Bhītargāon. Following the renovation of the temple, these *candraśālās* were removed and the cornices are now without ornamentation. Numerous *candraśālās* survive on the *śikhara* of the temple and contain, or at least once contained, terracotta heads. Post-excavation photographs from Pawāyā capture no longer extant *candraśālās* above the *kapota*, and along the walls of the second and possibly third terrace (Fig. 4.9). Although the horseshoe arches were found empty, several plaques depicting male and female busts survive from Pawāyā, some of which may have belonged to the *candraśālās* (Figs. 10.9 to 10.11). The Gupta temple at Darrā was home to fantastic, large *candraśālās* carved from an attractive pale-ochre sandstone. One of the most beautiful examples from the site is housed in the Kota Museum (Fig. 2.18). Within the 'dormer window' or *candraśālā* is a drummer seated on a cushion. His head is charmingly tilted to one side, his legs are crossed and he rotates his rather ill-proportioned body awkwardly. The border of the *candraśālā* depicts a convoluted *makara* on either side. Out of the upturned open mouth of each of the composite creatures climb flowering vines. Rows of *candraśālās*, both little and large, are positioned along what remains of the *śikhara* at Deogaṛh (Fig. 2.26). At Deogaṛh (Fig. 2.25), on the Pārvatī temple at Nāchnā (Fig. 2.30), and on the Śiva temple at Bhūmarā (Fig. 2.32), *candraśālās* are positioned along the door lintel. Given the small scale of our fragment from Ahichhatrā, we can imagine that it might have been positioned above a doorway, or on the cornice of a temple, rather than on a *śikhara*.

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[26] Adam Hardy, 'Parts and Wholes: The Story of the Gavākṣa', in *Religion and Art: New Issues in Indian Iconography and Iconology*, ed. by Claudine Bautze-Picron (London: British Association for South Asian Studies, 2008), pp. 63-82 (p. 64).

[27] Ibid., p. 64.

7.60. Candraśālā from Ahichhatrā measuring 14.5 x 24.5 cm. State Museum, Allahabad.

Conclusion

This overview has served to demonstrate that the function of the majority of surviving ornamental bricks from Ahichhatrā can be understood. Indeed, despite the individuality of some of the motifs, based on an analysis of the décor of standing Gupta temples, it is possible to theoretically situate every one of the fragments into an architectural scheme. As we have seen, however, a type of motif or architectural element may be used in more than one location on a temple façade: for example, miniature pilasters might be used on a *jagatī* or on a *śikhara*.

Originally, many of the ornamental bricks discussed above would have adorned the walls of the terraces on ACI and ACII, most probably in friezes similar to those still *in situ* on the Bhītargāon temple, and on pilasters possibly flanking each of the large figurative terracotta plaques that were once positioned along the walls of the upper terrace of ACI.

Part Two

Chapter 8: Introduction to Gupta Period Art and Literature Review

Introduction

The objectives of this chapter are to explore the emergence of the Gupta style; the much-renowned virtuosity of the Gupta artists; and the emergence and fruition of some of the most notable characteristics of the art of this epoch. The principle goal here is to develop a deeper understanding of the dominant trends in Gupta sculpture by drawing upon the corpus of stone and terracotta art in approximately equal measure. This chapter will provide a context by which to establish how the reliefs and sculptures at Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā, discussed in Chapters 10 and 11, relate to the body of Gupta sculpture in general, which in turn, will enable us to date the sculptures with more confidence (Fig. 8.2). Firstly, though, the chapter will begin with a discussion of the key literature on early Indian terracotta sculpture. This will also serve as an introduction to the production of terracotta art in all its aspects. This will be followed by an exploration of scholarship on north Indian sculpture in general, dating from the fourth to sixth centuries.

Sculpture is not discussed chronologically here, though the terms ‘early Gupta,’ ‘mature Gupta,’ and ‘late Gupta’ will crop up throughout the chapter. These periods are approximate, with the early period dating until around the first decades of the fifth century; the mature period dating until the late fifth century; and the late period lasting until *circa* 520 CE, although the Gupta style persisted for some time after the demise of the empire. Indeed, it is often difficult to differentiate between a late Gupta sculpture and one of the early post-Gupta period. The mature period is generally thought to be the highpoint of Gupta art, characterised by its elegance and beauty of form, and includes sculpture from temples such as Deogaṛh and Bhūmarā. Perhaps one of its greatest creations is the sublime seated ‘Sārnāth Buddha’, which arguably exemplifies the near formal perfection of some of the Gupta masterpieces (Fig. 8.1). Lastly, a significant proportion of the art discussed in the following three chapters on iconography has been divorced from its original setting and thus a comment from Meister is particularly apposite here:

> We may ourselves look – as Western art historians or, worse, as collectors, dealers or antiquarians – at an image of the Hindu Great Goddess first to judge if it is beautiful, well formed, or to ask its age or provenance; but its role in the temple's sanctum is as a stimulus for the worshipper's "vision"… Thus around it rituals arise that paint and clothe the image, surround it in sound and scent, in order further to accentuate its psychological effect on the viewer and make it efficacious …[1]

8.1. The Sārnāth Buddha housed in Sārnāth's Archaeological Museum.

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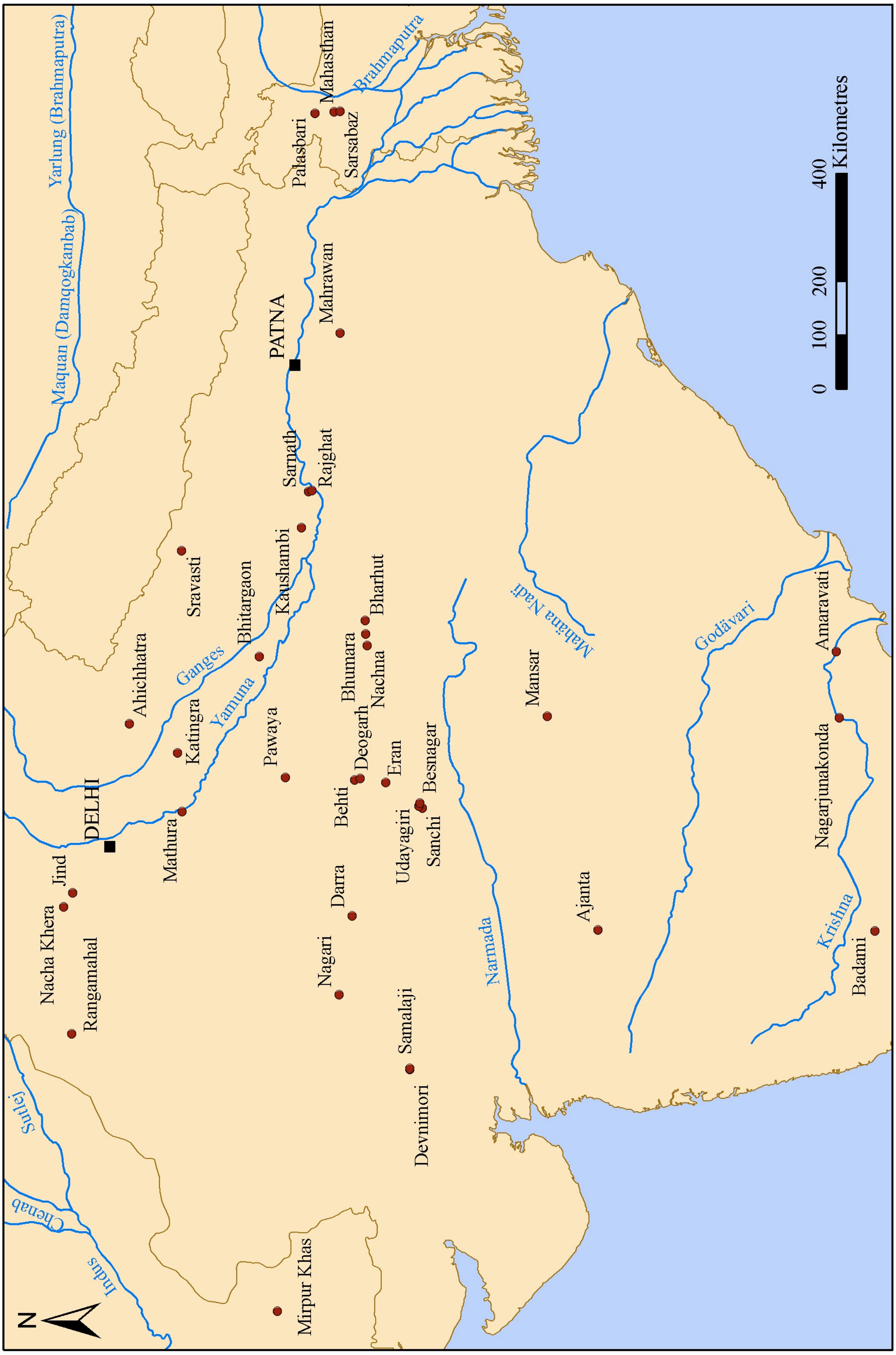
[1] Michael Meister, 'Indian Seeing and Western Knowing: an Art-Historian's Perspective', in *Śrī Nāgābhinandanam* vol. 1, ed. by L.K. Srinivasan and S. Nagaraju (Bangalore: M.S. Nagaraja Rao Felicitation Committee, 1995), pp. 157-170 (p. 161).



8.2. Map of sites where Gupta or post-Gupta reliefs and sculptures mentioned in Part Two of the thesis have been found.

Literature on Terracotta Art

Though rather piecemeal, much has been written on the terracotta art of the Indian subcontinent, and especially on the earliest terracotta findings with particular interest being accorded to the so-called ‘mother goddess’ figurines. Too few scholars have explored terracotta art post-dating the intricate relief plaques and figurines of the Śuṅga period in any depth, drawn as they often are to the compelling sociological questions raised by early historic terracottas.[2] It is perplexing that relatively little interest has been shown towards the fascinating terracottas of the Gupta period, which from an art historical point of view can be intriguing, informative, entertaining and visually interesting.

Ananda Coomaraswamy authored the earliest essays on Indian terracottas, publishing an article in 1927 on a substantial group of figurines spanning a period of about three thousand years acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.[3] Coomaraswamy classifies the terracottas chronologically. He writes:

> Amongst the types described that of the nude goddess is certainly the most interesting, and most important for the general history of culture. It had not hitherto been realized that this type, so well known from the Paleolithic period onward in Europe, in the Aegean, and in Mesopotamia, extended also to the Ganges valley.[4]

Coomaraswamy tentatively attempts to associate the ‘nude goddess’ type with *devīs* (goddesses) from the *vedas* and *sūtras*, especially with Vāśinī the ‘ruling goddess.’[5] As we shall shortly see, subsequent scholarship tends to reject the view that these early naked figurines represent known goddesses immortalised in textual sources.

Following in Coomaraswamy’s footsteps, Stella Kramrisch explored terracotta sculpture in a characteristically esoteric overview first published in 1939. Her article focuses on subjects such as the symbolism of clay as a medium; types of sculpture

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[2] For example: Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, ‘Early Indian Terra Cottas’, *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts*, 25 (1927), pp. 90-96.
[3] Ibid., p. 90.
[4] Ibid., p. 94.
[5] Ibid., p. 96.

and artefacts produced; locations where early terracottas have been unearthed; and the variation in types of clay and finishes used. The central premise of Kramrisch's argument is that two types of terracotta art co-existed. These she terms the timeless or ageless type and the timed varieties. In her own words, 'the timeless types persist, essentially changeless; the timed variations result from impresses which the passing moment leaves on them.'[6] The former are usually modelled by hand, and often consist of either human or animal figurines and chariots or toys.[7] These 'timeless' types are found across all ages. The timed varieties are made using a number of different methods but usually involve moulds.[8] The 'timed' terracottas include the figurative and ornamental plaques made to adorn the walls of temples. Dating the so-called 'timeless' types can be difficult unless they have been scientifically excavated.

V. S. Agrawala's seminal work on the *Terracotta Figurines of Ahichchhatrā*, first published in 1948, diligently catalogues over nine hundred figurative terracottas found during the 1940-44 excavations at Ahichhatrā, stretching from the Mauryan period right up until the eleventh century CE. The terracottas range from the simple so-called mother goddess figurines to the exquisite narrative panels and life-size Gangā and Yamunā figures dating to *circa* the Gupta period. There are occasional issues with dating and interpretation and these problems will be addressed in detail in Chapter 11.

James Harle devotes less than three pages to terracotta art in his publication on *Gupta Sculpture* (1974) despite describing large-scale terracottas as 'one of the chief glories of Gupta art.'[9] He focuses on sculpture belonging to some of the better-known brick and terracotta structures dating to around the Gupta period, such as the *stūpas* at Devnimori and Mīrpur Khās, the larger of the terraced monuments dedicated to Śiva at Ahichhatrā, and the temple at Bhītargāon.[10] Harle acknowledges that it was during the Gupta period 'that the finest sculpture in this ancient and perennial medium was

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[6] Stella Kramrisch, 'Indian Terracottas: Ageless Types and Timed Variations', *JISOA*, 7 (1939) in *Exploring India's Sacred Art, Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch*, ed. by Barbara Stoler Miller (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994, 1st edn 1983), pp. 89-110 (p. 69).

[7] Ibid., p. 71.

[8] Ibid., p. 79.

[9] Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, p. 7.

[10] Ibid., pp. 29-31.

made, works which have never been matched in their size and technique, at least in India, and which add a whole new dimension to Gupta sculpture.'[11]

M. K. Dhavalikar in his 1977 volume on *Masterpieces of Indian Terracottas* explores the development of sculpture and iconography in this medium. He describes how the Gupta *pustakāras* (modellers-in-clay) re-established the technique of moulding used by the Śuṅgas. Four different methods were employed: single mould or double mould, part-moulded and part handmade, or fully handmade.[12] Many terracottas from this period are painted with a layer of slip which may have been applied to cover defects.[13] The slip, with its rich colour, might have also served to enhance the art works. Dhavalikar's publication makes for a good though cursory introduction to the terracotta art of India.

In 1986, Vidula Jayaswal and Krishna Kalyan published *An Ethno-Archaeological View of India Terracottas* for which they explored one hundred and thirty-four terracotta-producing centres in the middle Gangetic plains.[14] They found that terracotta was overwhelmingly produced in urban settlements rather than in rural villages.[15] They write that:

> Terracotta art in India … has had a chequered history. Beginning from circa seventh millennium B.C., the tradition has managed to survive till today. There are, however, a number of gaps in between. The post-Harappan, the post-Śuṅga and the post-Gupta, for instance are the illustrative examples of the period of recession…[16]

Following on from a decline in the Kuṣāṇa era, the production of terracotta art flourished during the Gupta period.[17] In all probability there is a correlation between increased terracotta production and the extensive temple building activity of the Gupta age, much of which utilized brick and terracotta.

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[11] Ibid., p. 29.
[12] Dhavalikar, pp. 39-40.
[13] Ibid., p. 40.
[14] Vidula Jayaswal and Krishna Kalyan, *An Ethno-Archaeological View of Indian Terracottas* (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1986), pp. 3-7.
[15] Ibid., p. 7.
[16] Ibid., p. 104.
[17] Ibid., p. 104, p.119.

A major exhibition – *From Indian Earth, 4,000 Years of Terracotta Art* – curated by Amy Poster was held at the Brooklyn Museum, New York in 1986 and a fantastic array of Gupta terracottas were included. In the accompanying catalogue Poster gives a valuable overview of Indian terracotta art and its development. From the start she emphasizes how despite the abundance of terracotta sculpture in the subcontinent, 'it is geographically scattered and there is often little or no literary evidence to guide the interpreter.'[18] This she rightly describes as an art historical challenge. Additionally, it is worth noting that find-spots are often not recorded or at least not known, further complicating the situation. Poster draws attention to the importance attached to the type of clay used and its preparation:

> The clay used for terracottas is the same as that used for common pottery. Ideally it comes from riverbeds or alluvial plains, but alternative sources are sometimes selected for other, perhaps ritualistic, reasons. After the clay is cleaned of pebbles and other impurities, it is mixed with a tempering material such as rice husk, ash, sand, cattle dung, or a combination of these, which reduces the shrinkage, warping, and splitting that may occur in firing. Varieties of clay can be mixed in different proportions to achieve different results, depending on the purpose for which the terracotta is intended. Local traditions for the selection of the clay mixtures vary.[19]

Firing also has an impact on the finished product. Different methods are used, including kilns, ovens, or open pits.[20] If the clay is exposed to air during firing, then it will turn red in colour, often with a grey interior. If the clay is not exposed to air then it will turn grey or black.[21] In the same catalogue Vidya Dehejia notes that there is a distinction between types of potters as described in an early Buddhist text, the *Mahāvastu*. Modellers are called *puṣkaras*; potters, *kumbhakāras*; and brick masons, *iṣtakāvardhakin*.[22]

Echoing this, Joachim Bautze in his short volume titled *Early Indian Terracottas* (1995) asserts that there must have been a hierarchy between potters quite early on as

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[18] *From Indian Earth*, p. 17.

[19] Ibid., pp. 19-20.

[20] Ibid., p. 20.

[21] Ibid., p. 20.

[22] Vidya Dehejiya, 'Brick Temples: Origins and Development', in *From Indian Earth, 4,000 Years of Terracotta Art*, ed. by Amy G. Poster (The Brooklyn Museum: New York, 1986), pp. 43-56 (p. 47).

demonstrated by the exceptional quality of some but not all figurines produced between the second century BCE and the first century CE.[23] In his study Bautze focuses on terracotta techniques, scientific methods for testing the antiquity of figurines, and on the iconography of terracottas dating from the Maurya period up until the first century CE.

The various deities depicted in early terracotta art dating from *circa* the second century BCE to the first century CE are classed by Naman Ahuja as belonging to one grand pantheon in *A Pantheon Rediscovered?* (2009). His work explores the development of this style of art including possible cross-cultural influences;[24] the iconography of these deities; to some extent the role they played in society; and how they were worshipped. He attributes an importance to these relief panels that have too often been dismissed as minor antiquities, and by doing so contributes much to scholarship in this field.[25] Ahuja has demonstrated convincingly that while the goddesses in pan-India terracotta reliefs most probably belonged to a once popular vanished cult, some of the iconographic devices used were adopted in the imagery of the later deities. Moreover, ‘the contexts within which they were worshipped, and the nature of the exchange or interaction between the gods and their attendants endured, and were repeatedly used in the service of whichever new gods might have become important in later periods.’[26]

The catalogue accompanying the 2007 exhibition on *The Golden Age of Classical India – The Gupta Empire*, held at the Musée Guimet in Paris, encompasses a study by John Dawson on ‘Gupta Terracotta Art: an overview.’ The chapter is largely a compilation of previously published material but nevertheless includes some interesting insights. In particular, Dawson refers to the seventh century play *Kādambarī* written by Bāṇabhaṭṭa, in which it is stated that brick and stone architecture were of equal rank, and that ‘the production of clay on a mass scale

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[23] Joachim Karl Bautze, *Early Indian Terracottas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), p.1.

[24] Naman P. Ahuja, ‘A Pantheon Rediscovered?’, in *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence, The Proceedings of the 32nd International Congress in the History of Art 2008*, ed. by Jaynie Anderson (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2009), pp. 429-437 (p. 431).

[25] Ibid., p. 429.

[26] Naman P. Ahuja, ‘Changing Gods, Enduring Rituals: Observations on Early Indian Religion as seen through Terracotta Imagery, *c*. 200 BC-AD 100’, in *South Asian Archaeology 2001, Volume II: Historical Archaeology and Art History*, ed. by Catherine Jarrige and Vincent Lefèvre (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les civilisations, 2005), pp. 345-354 (p. 352).

beautified all the distant quarters of space.'[27] Dawson in part attributes the abundance of terracotta art to the influence of the *Pāñcarātra Bhāgavatas* who encouraged the construction of sacred monuments in order to give concrete form to religion.[28]

In a chapter dedicated to the mother goddess figurines from Mathurā and Ahichhatrā (2009), Shivani Agarwal, like Jayaswal and Kalyan before her, argues that terracotta production is closely linked to urbanisation. She writes:

> Certain complex social conditions need to be fulfilled before one can talk about a large-scale production of terracotta figurines. And such a production is undertaken only where there is a demand arising either from institutionalized religious cults that require the use of clay figurines as votive offerings, magical charms, or household deities, or from a public who would buy secular figurines for the decoration of homes, such as toys for children, or for other varied purposes.

Drawing upon Niharranjan Ray's research into Mauryan terracottas, the co-existence of a refined court art and non-elite 'folk' art (both in the medium of terracotta) is again emphasised.[29] In Agarwal's words:

> The most important aspect of terracotta art is that it functions at multiple levels. Religious and secular. Therefore, while one set of terracotta objects might represent the tastes of the affluent urban class, another group may have fulfilled local cultic needs. The leading Brahmanical deities in temples were fashioned in terracotta, along with other objects like votive tanks and animal figurines that could have been utilized for religious offerings at shrines.[30]

As an aside, the hierarchy present in the genre of terracotta art is conspicuous at Ahichhatrā. Agrawal makes an interesting observation when she notes that many of the female figurines are found alongside images of recognisable goddesses such as

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[27] Dawson, p. 86.

[28] Ibid., p. 86.

[29] Shivani Agarwal, 'Terracottas from Mathura and Ahichchhatra: Archaeological Study', in *Ancient India: New Research*, ed. by Upinder Singh and Nayanjot Lahiri (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 231-253 (p.237).

[30] Ibid., p.251.

Durgā or Lakṣmī and thus she concludes that the mother goddess terracottas cannot be prototypes for these later goddesses.[31]

In *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual* (2009), Michael Willis highlights the significance of various materials for image-making. Drawing upon the *Baudhāyanagṛhyasūtrapariśiṣṭa*, he describes two groups of images:

> (1) temporary representations made of perishable materials with which the deity associates for a short period, typically the duration of a festival, and (2) durable statues made of stone or metal that are set up in shrines and in which gods are supposed to take up permanent residence. The difference between the two is highlighted in the *Baudhāyana* where permanent images are installed on a plinth (*pādapīṭha*).[32]

Clay counts amongst the perishable materials: 'The short-term association of the deity with the representation is the norm for festival-images made of clay. These images are frequently set up in temporary shrines or paraded through the streets.' Usually they are then deposited ceremoniously in a nearby river or ocean.[33] Incidentally, Varāhamihira's *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* composed during the sixth century CE contains a passage detailing the diverse benefits that will be accrued by the patron of a temple image made from wood; clay; precious stones; gold; silver; copper; or stone.

> An image (*pratimā*) made of wood or of clay confers longevity, prosperity, strength and victory; one made of precious stone leads to the weal of the world; one of gold leads to plenty; one of silver makes for fame; one of copper increases progeny; however, a stone image or *liṅga* [[leads to]] the acquisition of immense landed property. (*BS* 60)[34]

Since the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* dates to the late Gupta period the text is even more pertinent to this study.

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[31] Ibid., p.244.
[32] Willis, *The Archaeology*, p. 130.
[33] Ibid., p. 130.
[34] Ibid., p. 133.

Literature on Gupta Art

As discussed in the Introduction to the thesis, the Gupta age is deservedly celebrated as a period of considerable accomplishment in art, mathematics, the sciences and in secular and religious literature. The body of scholarship on Gupta art is relatively substantial although in truth little of it is of a deeply inquiring nature. James Harle's concise monograph on *Gupta Sculpture* (1974) classifies sculpture by area, with terracottas being confined to a short chapter of their own at the end of the volume. The foundations, development and blossoming of the Gupta style is dealt with region by region, forming a sound scholarly base for further studies. About the epoch Harle writes:

> The Gupta period has been interpreted as a manifestation of Indian cultural nationalism, after centuries of foreign influence. There seems little point in denying this: the Gupta period is quintessentially Indian and will determine the development of Indian culture for centuries.[35]

A flaw in the nationalist argument is that it supposes that somehow inter-cultural influences never fully penetrate the consciousness of a nation; as though, to use an example closer to home, an untainted and pure "Englishness" has managed to survive without influence the conquests of the Vikings, Saxons, Romans and Normans and later the burgeoning of a multi-cultural society. This leads to the rhetorical question, what does 'quintessentially Indian' mean after centuries of foreign influence? Kuṣāṇa iconography, for instance, remains the dominant source of inspiration for Gupta artists, especially in the Mathurā region. Undoubtedly, though, the impact of the Guptas has been felt in later times, especially in the spheres of religion and art, not only in India, but in parts of Southeast Asia and China too.

Harle notes that 'both Mathurā and Gandhāra were permeated with influences from the Graeco-Roman world and it is a curious fact that certain of these only appear to surface at this late date.'[36] A study of the terracotta plaques from Raṅgamahal in Rajasthan might suggest that overt classical Greek and Hellenistic influences were

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[35] Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, p. 7.

[36] Ibid., p. 7.

still pervasive in parts of India (outside of Gandhāra) prior to the Gupta period. In a paper published in 1973, however, Joanna Williams suggests that the Guptas may have had ‘revivalist tendancies’ in so much as they seem to have on occasion consciously appropriated imagery from previous centuries.[37] Supporting this view, Willis asserts that the Guptas adopted Mauryan forms for the benefit of their politically motivated agendas.[38]

An excellent if cursory introduction to the art of the epoch is to be found in the second volume of V. S. Agrawala’s publication on Gupta art (1977), which is based on an earlier study (1948) and was compiled posthumously by P. K. Agrawala. A great deal of material is covered in the areas of iconography, sculpture, terracottas, architecture and painting. His approach to the art of the period is sensitive and insightful though strongly ideological, governed as it is by a popular belief that this was a veritable Golden Age. He describes two principle happenings in the art and architecture of the period; firstly, in his own words this was ‘a unique epoch of [the] universal cult of Beauty (which the contemporary literature refers to as *Rūpa-sattra* or *Lāvanya-sattra*),’ and secondly, many Hindu temples were constructed using stone masonry.[39]

Frederick Asher in *The Art of Eastern India 300-800* (1980) sheds light on a part of the subcontinent which despite constituting the heartland of the Gupta Empire has a relative paucity of extant Gupta art and architecture. He questions whether regional rulers governing small territories within the further reaches of the empire may have been more active in commissioning monuments and sculptures,[40] although, as he notes, there are numerous inscriptions from Eastern India that describe Gupta temples and images no longer in existence.[41] It is worth recalling here that Bihar and West Bengal are among the most populous regions of modern India and this has no doubt had a detrimental effect upon the survival of monuments and artefacts in recent times, not to mention the Islamic iconoclasm of earlier periods. Asher proposes that during the Gupta period there was a move away from art being largely restricted to urban and

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[37] Joanna Williams, ‘A Recut Aśōkan Capital and the Gupta Attitude towards the Past’, *Artibus Asiae*, 35 (1973), pp. 225-240 (p. 225).
[38] Willis, *The Archaeology*, p. 63.
[39] Agrawala, *Gupta Art*, p. 3.
[40] Frederick M. Asher, *The Art of Eastern India, 300-800* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1980), p. 14.
[41] Ibid., p. 15.

monastic sites as it had been under the Kuṣāṇas, emphasising that this is especially true of Madhya Pradesh.[42] He writes:

> Similarly in Eastern India we can with good reason imagine that this was a time when monuments were installed distant from the traditional urban and religious centres, though along routes that were now increasingly well travelled.[43]

As we have previously learnt, decentralisation may not apply so much to brick and terracotta temples, which were reliant on urban settlements for the production of their construction materials.[44]

In 1982 Joanna Williams published *The Art of Gupta India, Empire and Province* – a substantial study, ambitious in its scope. Like Harle, she categorises art by region, further subdividing it according to chronology. Williams has sought to demonstrate that 'unifying forces transcended regional ones in the core period, A.D. 370 to 550.'[45] She emphasizes the influence of Mathurā on art of the Gupta period, writing that as a place of pilgrimage:

> It must have outweighed any other center or *tīrtha* for all three major religions of north India, and its workshops must have had a widespread impact, whether by means of the actual export of images and artists or by means of more loosely defined prestige.[46]

Oddly, in contrast to Harle, Williams argues that Kuṣāṇa art from Mathurā was the only influence on the art of the Guptas.[47] Williams covers a tremendous amount of material here dating up until 650 CE, more than a century into the post-Gupta period.

Michael Willis's interdisciplinary study on *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual* (2009) intermittently analyses the iconography of the Gupta period in relation to kingship and ritual practices of the day within the context of the geographical location and surrounding landscape. This inquisitive approach enhances our understanding of the multiple layers of meaning, both sacred and political, arguably present in some of the religious sculpture of the period, while at the same time giving a measure of visual

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[42] Ibid., p. 19.
[43] Ibid., p. 19.
[44] Jayaswal and Kalyan, p. 7.
[45] Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, p. 5.
[46] Ibid., p. 5.
[47] Ibid., p. 9.

form to rituals and myths embedded in texts. Udayagiri lends itself perfectly to this type of multi-faceted and probing study since, although much erosion has taken place, many of the images hewn into the rock face are still more or less extant and thus the relationship between these images and the significance of their positioning can be explored. In addition, important inscriptions survive, allowing for an expansion of our understanding of the site and of the Gupta elite.

Finally, it is hoped that the following chapters will disprove Wendy Doniger's damning statement that:

> Gupta art, however pretty, was not nearly as imaginative or vigorous as that of the ages that preceded and followed it; it seems lifeless and bloodless, classical in the sense of "boring," in comparison with the earlier Kushana sculpture and, later, the voluptuous statues of the Cholas, the vibrant images of the Basohli painting. In my humble opinion, Indian art is better than Greek art and therefore *much* better than art (such as Gupta art) that imitates Hellenistic art (which is second-rate Greek art).[48]

Some Characteristics of Gupta Period Temple Sculpture

In focusing on iconography it would be a shame to neglect the artistry of the Ahichhatrā plaques and of Gupta period sculpture as a whole. An animated sense of drama and engaging story-telling skills are characteristic of the figurative terracotta panels from this period, evidenced in the surviving plaques from Bhītargāon, Ahichhatrā, and Śrāvastī, fragments from Pawāyā and in the numerous lively Gupta panels with no known findspot.

Referring to the plaques from Ahichhatrā, Agrawala writes:

> From a study of the specimens one thing stands out clear, namely, that the iconography of the figures seems to have been quite elastic during that formative period of Purāṇic Hinduism. The modellers concentrate more on the central

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[48] Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus, an Alternative History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 374.

> theme of the story than on the rigid details of the iconographic formula, such as was insisted upon by the later *Śilpa* and *Āgamic* literature.[49]

Moreover, Kramrisch emphasises the spontenaity that distinguishes the medium of clay from stone or metal work.[50] She writes:

> The brick temples of Bhitargaon and Ahichhatrā … abound in figures having animated physiognomies. They are without the iconic restraints that impress themselves on the hieratic conventions that the image of deity demands … Irregularities in symmetry and proportion … enliven the divine countenance of the image of deity when modeled in clay.[51]

8.3. Two figures, probably Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Photograph courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.[52]

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[49] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 64.
[50] Stella Kramrisch, 'Śiva Bholānātha, c. 450-550', *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin*, 80 (1984), pp. 4-8 (p. 4).
[51] Ibid., p. 4.
[52] The findspot of this panel has not been recorded.

A vignette-like terracotta panel housed in the Brooklyn Museum seems to capture an intimate moment between Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, with the brothers sitting beside each other on cushions. Although their bodies are rather slack, their faces are exquisitely moulded, rendering the scene almost believable (Fig. 8.3). A second plaque, evidently from the same temple and now at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, also depicts a scene from the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Fig. 8.4). The plaque portrays the heroic vulture Jaṭāyu – a nephew of Viṣṇu's vehicle Garuḍa – trying to prevent the *rākṣasa* Rāvaṇa from abducting Sītā. The story ends unhappily as Jaṭāyu dies and Sītā is forcibly removed to Rāvaṇa's kingdom of Laṅkā. Returning to the plaque, the two figures are situated at a window – possibly in the *rākṣasa's* celestial carriage, while the bird is outside. Sītā clutches the window ledge, while holding her other hand to her chest in a theatrical and damsel-in-distress-like manner. She turns to look away from her captor. Rāvaṇa on the other hand wields his sword above his head, trying to slay the vulture. The composition is simple but emotive, and looks somewhat akin to a stage set.

8.4. Sītā with Rāvaṇa and Jaṭāyu. Photograph courtesy of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco.[53]

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[53] The findspot of this panel has not been recorded.

Figurative temple imagery of the Gupta age is characterised by a certain playful quality and sometimes even humour, especially evident in terracotta reliefs. At Bhītargāon, for example, alongside the plaques depicting gods, goddesses and *asuras*, celestial beings, lovers, scenes of combat, *makaras*, musicians, animals and meditating ascetics, we find characterful figures located in the upper reaches of the *śikhara* (Figs. 8.5 and 8.6).

8.5. Moustachioed male figure from the śikhara of the Bhītargāon temple. Photograph courtesy of the Princeton University Museum.[54]

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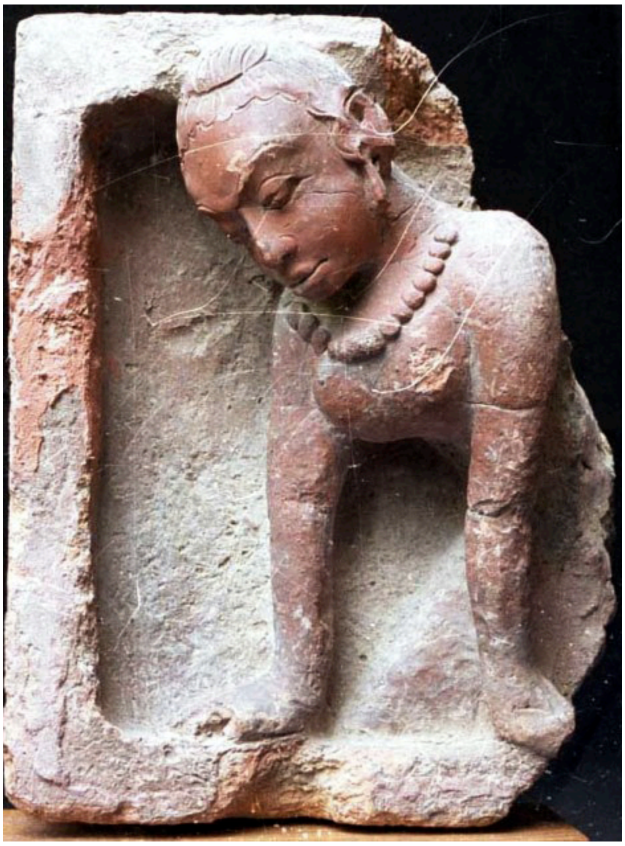
[54] In an American Institute of Indian Studies photograph this fragmented plaque can be seen *in situ* on the temple. It has since been illegally removed and is now in the collections of the Princeton University Museum.

Many of these figures are depicted either holding the border of the plaque, or resting their palms on it, as if it really were the frame of a window or balcony; the figures lean forward, looking out of their niches in order to contemplate the scene below (Fig. 8.7). Details such as these help to contribute towards animating the temple, conveying the impression that a whirlwind of activity, both of a mundane and celestial nature, is taking place here – as though the temple was a representation of the cosmos in its entirety. Similar themes were represented on most brick and stone temples of the Gupta period (Figs. 8.8 and 8.9).

8.6. Terracotta plaque depicting a yogi from the temple of Bhītargāon. Reserve collections of the State Museum, Lucknow.



8.7. Terracotta plaque possibly hailing from Bhītargāon. Photography courtesy of the Jñāna-Pravāha, Centre for Cultural Studies and Research, Vārāṇasī.

8.8. A fragment of a badly damaged fifth century terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā depicting a male musician playing a vīṇā. State Museum, Allahabad.

8.9. A fifth century terracotta plaque depicting a musician playing a vīṇā; find spot unknown. Photograph courtesy of the British Museum.

Although not exclusively a Gupta trait, the polarity between the sensual and the spiritual in temple iconography of the period is conspicuous and deliberate. For instance, we might find a depiction of a hermitage with emaciated ascetics situated in close proximity to an image portraying an embracing couple or drunken figures, as demonstrated on some of the pillar reliefs at Deogaṛh. It might be said that the multi-dimensional nature of the human condition is presented here. In Christianity, sensuality and spirituality are viewed as conflicting states, best exemplified by the concept of original sin. On the whole though, this conflict is not so present in Hinduism, which often fully embraces sensuality in its temple iconography. As Pal writes, 'no matter how lofty and spiritual the purpose of a sculpture, the sensuous appeal of the human body was never ignored.'[55]

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[55] Pratapaditya Pal, *Indian Sculpture Volume I, circa 500 B.C. to A.D. 700*, *Catalogue of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Collection* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1986), p. 36.

There is an immediacy about Gupta figurative sculpture, an intimacy even, heightened by a vaguely naturalistic rendering of the nevertheless suitably ideal body, which arguably draws the devotee closer to the world of the divine than in later temple sculpture with its often heavily exaggerated forms serving to distance gods from man. The doorjamb and niche relief sculptures on the stone temple dedicated to Viṣṇu at Deogaṛh are a demonstration of Gupta art at its finest. While the sinuous, graceful figures do embody an ideal, they simultaneously convey a sense of humanity. The intimate scene depicting Devakī handing over her newborn son Krṣṇa to Vasudeva (Fig. 8.10a), and the charming follow up scene portraying Vasudeva and Yaśodā (Krṣṇa's foster mother) swapping their newborn babes, are just two such examples (Fig. 8.10b).[56]

8.10. Relief carvings from the jagatī at Deogaṛh: (a) Devakī handing Krṣṇa to Vasudeva, in the National Museum, New Delhi; (b) Vasudeva and Yaśodā swapping babies. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

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[56] The Vasudeva Devakī relief panel is on display at the National Museum in New Delhi; the Vasudeva Yaśodā panel is still *in situ* at Deogaṛh.

It is often remarked upon that there is an extraordinary uniformity in artistic style across the vast expanse of the Gupta Empire, [57] no doubt facilitated by trade and pilgrimage routes. On the subject of terracotta art, Harle writes:

> Whatever their place of origin, whether it be Bikaner, Mathura, Ahichchhatra, Kausambi, Malwar, the eastern Doab, or the terai, an unmistakable uniformity of style marks all these works. If any doubts remain as to the existence of a Gupta style, these terracottas, from every corner of the Gupta dominions, should dispel them once and for all.[58]

It might be argued that this is a rather simplistic approach and that in actuality there is considerable diversity in terracotta styles across the Gupta Empire with figurines from Mahāsthān, for example, being quite distinctive from those originating in Ahichhatrā. This diversity will be demonstrated in Chapter 9. Nevertheless, there is a recognizable Gupta style, perhaps most evident in stone sculpture, and this style will be explored in the following passages.

The Gupta style did not emerge fully-fledged out of the blue but rather the art of their predecessors, the Kuṣāṇas and Kṣatrapas, was modified, developed and, arguably, improved. Influences from Gandhāra, Sāñcī, Amarāvatī, Nāgārjunakoṇḍa and elsewhere are also perceptible in Gupta sculpture. Drawing upon these influences, the Guptas attained new heights of excellence. On the basis of style and geography it is reasonable to conclude that the art of the Kuṣāṇas was the most direct source of influence for the Guptas, particularly for the Mathurā school. Overly pronounced lower-eyelids, eyes sometimes bordering on the spherical, low-lying eyebrows, and prominent chins are common characteristics of facial features in Kuṣāṇa sculpture. The overall effect can be mask-like, although charming in its own way. In Gupta period sculpture the following characteristics are often present: an oval face verging on round, and a small and slightly pronounced chin. Very occasionally, as in some examples from Ahichhatrā and Śrāvastī,[59] the face is narrower and more almond-shaped with the chin culminating in a point. Invariably the lips are full. Eyes tend to be wide, shaped like lotus petals and lidded. Sometimes the eyes are lowered. The

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[57] See Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, p. 31.

[58] Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, p. 31.

[59] The narrower face shape is seen in the terracotta heads depicting Śiva and Pārvatī from Ahichhatrā ACI (Figs. 9.45 and 9.46).

eyebrows usually form a single sweeping arch over the eye. If the image represents an *aghora* form of Śiva, a god in the act of slaying a demon, an *asura*, or a battle scene then often the eyebrows are animated, turning upwards above the nose, and sometimes bushy.[60] In this type of image the forehead is in many instances furrowed. The hairline on Gupta images is usually straight, unless the hairstyle calls for something more elaborate such as a trefoil design. The nose is narrow with wide but delicate nostrils. Facial expressions are often fairly uniform; the mouth on the brink of a smile, for example, is a feature of the more benign gods, goddesses, minor divinities, musicians, lovers and the like, in both stone and terracotta sculpture across the empire.

8.11. (a) śālabañjikā from Mathurā in the V&A (photograph courtesy of the V&A); (b) śālabañjikā or river goddess in the Government Museum, Mathurā.

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[60] The terracotta plaque from Śrāvastī depicting an ascetic Śiva is a good example of this (Fig. 9.48).

The manner in which the human anatomy is depicted in Gupta period sculpture likewise evolves out of the art that preceded it. A red sandstone fragment from a pillar bracket depicting a *śālabañjikā* (female tree spirit symbolizing fertility) from Mathurā, dating to the 2nd century CE (Kuṣāṇa period), is housed at the V&A Museum (Fig. 8.11a). In the typical manner of a *śālabañjikā*, she holds one arm above her head and clasps the branch of a fruit tree. Her sensuous form is voluptuous and exaggerated. Her arms are slender and without definition; her breasts are large; her waist is small; her hips are wide and her thighs are round. She is naked but for jewellery, a broad girdle and a sash around her hips. This figure represents the ideal of female beauty – an ideal that persists until the present day in India. The Guptas perfected the representation of this same ideal of physical beauty in sculpture. A much-damaged fragment of a red sandstone *śālabañjikā* or river goddess[61] from Mathurā dating to the Gupta period makes a good comparison with the Kuṣāṇa example since the essential elements are the same (Fig. 8.11b). The Gupta female also raises an arm above her head to clutch a branch (now lost). Unlike the Kuṣāṇa *śālabañjikā*, her posture is sinuous. Her head is tilted and turned away from her raised arm, lending a sense of movement to the image. Movement is further expressed through the long flowing shawl she wears draped over her shoulders, and which follows the contours of her body on either side. The ratio of hip to waist has been reduced and is more naturalistic. Overall the Gupta composition is more ambitious, harmonious and more successful.

The concept of an ideal human form likewise extends to the male physique. Generally speaking, Gupta period sculptures depicting male subjects have the following idiosyncrasies: broad, rounded shoulders; a muscular body; a slender waist and gently curving hips. The abdomen often protrudes very slightly over the lower garment. This latter characteristic features in the superb – though damaged – mature Gupta period red sandstone image of Viṣṇu from Mathurā (Fig. 8.12). Especially in the polished stone sculptures hailing from the Mathurā area, Gupta artists succeeded in creating the appearance of plumpness of flesh, quite a feat considering the lack of plasticity attributed to stone.

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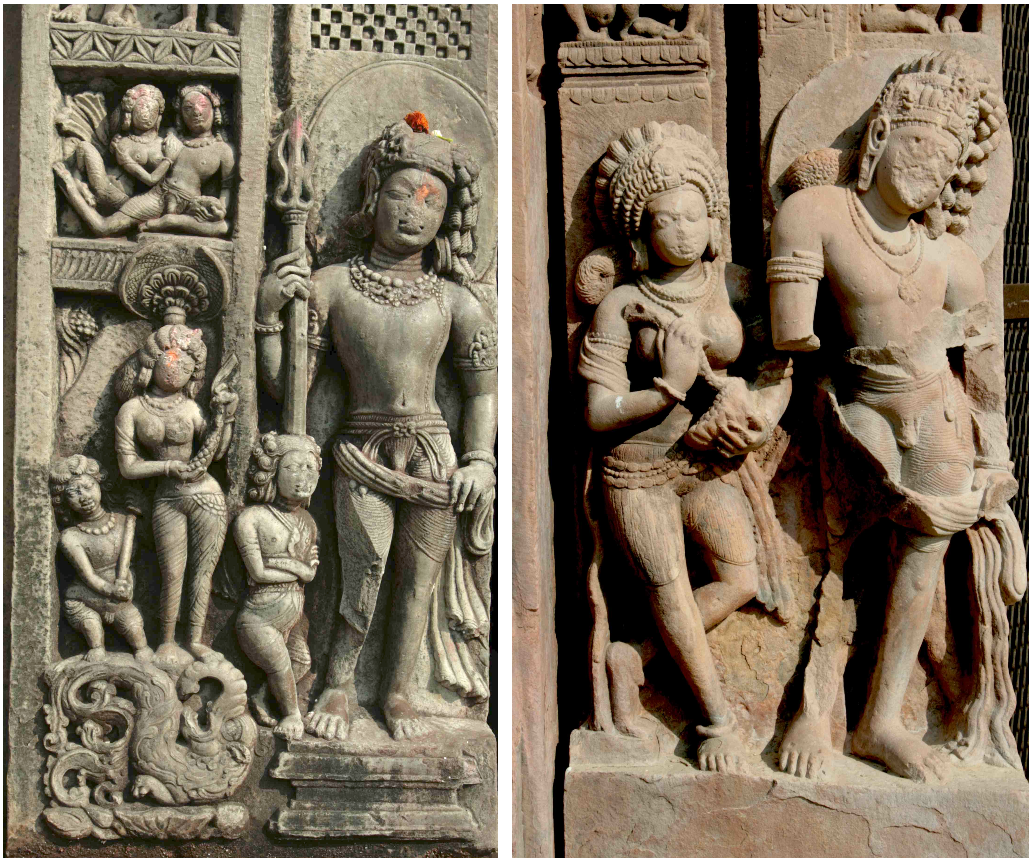
[61] M. C. Joshi believes the sculpture to depict the river goddess Yamunā. This is, however, difficult to verify since the lower portion of the sculptural relief is lost; thus no indication of her tortoise mount has survived. Okada and Zephir, p. 164.

8.12. A fragmented sculpture of Viṣṇu from Mathurā in the National Museum, New Delhi.

Distinctive regional or site-specific fashions are often demonstrated through hairstyles, headdresses and clothing; yet there is, nevertheless, still a considerable amount of uniformity in this area as well. Ascetics and sages, for example, wear their hair in matted locks indicated by a ribbed design; the locks are then tied into a topknot. Notably, this type of hairstyle is found in some earlier Gandhāran depictions of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. A further example of uniformity in relation to attire is demonstrated by the *dvārapālas* (door-guardians) situated on the doorjambs of the Pārvatī temple at Nāchnā, and at the Daśāvatāra temple, Deogaṛh (Figs. 8.13a and 8.13b). These figures sport corresponding ringleted hairstyles and similar garments despite the temples being located about 225 km apart. Their stances though are different, with *contrapposto* being used consummately on the figurative reliefs at Deogaṛh.



8.13. (a) Figures at the base of a door jamb on the Pārvatī temple at Nāchnā; (b) figures on the base of a doorjamb of the Daśāvatāra temple at Deogaṛh. Both photographs courtesy of Adam Hardy.

Of particular interest for our study are the wall murals in Caves 1, 2, 16 and 17 at Ajaṇṭā. These Buddhist caves were excavated and painted by the western Vākāṭakas during the fifth and sixth centuries CE at around the same time that the Guptas were ruling to the north of the country.[62] Through their sumptuous compositions and rich earthy colours the Ajaṇṭā murals vividly bring to life many of the image types present in Gupta art. Indeed, some of the voluptuous females depicted in the murals are remarkably similar, iconographically speaking, to their Gupta sculptural counterparts, especially those from Deogaṛh. At the Daśāvatāra temple, Deogaṛh, and Cave 1, Ajaṇṭā, women or goddesses are frequently depicted with nude upper bodies, large breasts and tiny waists often with three rolls of skin at the navel. Sometimes they are portrayed wearing several strings of beads or pearls around their necks, the lowest of which falls between their breasts.

Most characters in the Ajaṇṭā murals are clothed in brightly coloured striped fabrics. This type of fabric was evidently in vogue and is praised in the Gupta period Mandasor Inscription written by Vatsabhaṭṭi on behalf of a guild of silk-weavers, recording the dedication of a no longer extant temple. On the subject of the guild, the inscription narrates that:

> … these men, who have adorned their whole earth in
>
> robes of silk,
>
> pleasant to the touch, lovely to the eye, with varied
>
> stripes of different colours…[63]

The figures portrayed in Gupta sculptures are often attired in clothing that is sometimes interpreted as being pleated. It is possible, however, that by and large the artists were representing striped silks or cottons.

Most of the decorative motifs used to great effect on Gupta period temples are found in earlier art from Gandhāra, Nāgārjunakoṇḍa and elsewhere. The Guptas developed already popular motifs into increasingly convoluted and intricate forms. By the mature Gupta period (mid-fifth century), a previously unparalleled excellence had been attained in this area, as demonstrated by the exquisite ornamental carvings –

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[62] Benoy K. Behl, *The Ajanta Caves, Ancient Paintings of Buddhist India* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), p. 27.

[63] A. L. Basham, ‘The Mandasor Inscription of the Silk-Weavers’, in *Essays on Gupta Culture*, ed. by Bardwell L. Smith (Missouri: South Asia Books, 1983), p. 99.

mostly drawn from nature – on the temples at Deogaṛh, Bhūmarā, Darrā and Behṭi (Figs. 8.14a and 8.14b).

8.14. (a) Dwarf with climbing vine on a doorjamb of the Daśāvatāra temple at Deogaṛh; (b) dwarf with climbing vine on a doorjamb of the Pārvatī temple at Nāchnā. Both photographs courtesy of Adam Hardy.

One of the motifs most characteristic of Gupta art is the dwarf with a climbing-vine growing from his navel. Harle draws upon this motif to define the art of the Gupta period:

> The Gupta style, particularly in its early phase, is a combination of the earthy and the dainty, in Goetz's phrase, of strength and elegance, of the sublime and the grotesque. Out of all these paradoxes stems its unique flavour. In the later period the paradoxes tend to be resolved into a uniquely graceful, harmonious, and cohesive style, well exemplified by the small dwarf out of whose navel rises the vine scroll on the door-jambs of several Gupta temples. Already a unifying link between the beautiful and the grotesque, in one of the later temples the vine

motif actually spreads to the body of the dwarf and the vegetable and the human coalesce.[64]

Regional Styles

Although there is a definite ‘Gupta style’, regional differences are also significant. These variances are most obvious in headdresses and clothing, but also sometimes in the representation of myths, as will be addressed in the following chapter. The former might sometimes reflect local fashions, or even the creativity of the artist. For example, to the best of my knowledge, the curious attire worn by the life-sized terracotta Gangā and Yamunā sculptures from Ahichhatrā is a fashion not found elsewhere (Fig. 8.15). The goddesses wear a short blouse or a wrap, which is open in the middle to expose the lower part of the breasts. The terracotta bust of a Mātṛkā (mother goddess) from Ahichhatrā ACIII portrays the goddess wearing an identical blouse to that of the Gangā and Yamunā sculptures (Fig. 8.16). Moreover, an architectural fragment found in a field close to the pyramidal Śiva temple during my first visit to Ahichhatrā in 2011, depicts the head and torso of a female figure wearing the same style of blouse (Fig. 8.17).

8.16. Detail of the Gangā relief from Ahichhatrā in the National Museum in New Delhi.

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[64] Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, p. 8.

8.17. Mātṛkā bust from Ahichhatrā ACIII. National Museum in New Delhi.

8.15. Fragment found in a field at Ahichhatrā in 2011. Photograph courtesy of Bhuvan Vikrama.

Conclusion

The Guptas drew heavily on the artistic traditions of their predecessors from across the length and breadth of South Asia, with Kuṣāṇa art being the strongest influence. It was from this starting point that the Guptas succeeded in developing a style which at its height, demonstrates a delicate and captivating balance between the sensual and spiritual, and the earthy and graceful. Narrative terracotta relief sculpture in particular epitomises the playful and emotive approach to story telling by artists in this period. Likewise, engaging examples of narrative depictions are also found in stone relief sculpture, for example, at Udayagiri and Deogaṛh.

The treatment of the human body arguably reaches a highpoint during this era. The sensuality of the human form in pre-Gupta art is retained, but the figure becomes ever more sinuous, well-proportioned, and naturalistic, though still keeping within the realms of the ideal. Certainly one of the most endearing qualities of the art of this period is its relative humanness and immediacy in contrast to the often exquisite but more remote forms of much of later South Asian temple art.

Falling under the broad umbrella term, ‘Gupta style’, are a multitude of regional and site-specific variations. It is arguably more accurate to describe the sculpture produced in Mathurā and Sārnāth – the dominant artistic centres of the Gupta period – as quintessentially Gupta, and moreover, as defining the parameters for Gupta art across the empire. Art produced outside of these two centres attempts to follow these principles closely, while often adding some local flair. The corpus of sculpture explored in Chapter 9 will add weight to this argument. Terracottas from, for instance, Nachar Khera, Ahichhatrā, Raṅgamahal, and possibly Katingra, are all stylistically distinct from one another. Indeed, within Ahichhatrā alone there are wide-ranging styles, as Chapters 9 and 11 will demonstrate. It is important to note, however, that the terracottas from these various sites probably span a timeframe of almost two hundred years; and these lapses in time would naturally have a direct bearing on style, iconography and current fashions in clothing and so forth.

Lastly, as Gupta period Hindu temple architecture evolved, iconographic schemes likewise become increasingly ambitious, with the cosmos being represented in its infinite variety on temple exteriors. Thus, besides depictions of gods, goddesses and *asuras*; musicians, dancers, archers, wrestlers, mythical creatures, attendant figures, celestial beings, lovers, *yogis*, and a plethora of flora and fauna are often represented. It should be noted that a similarly rich tapestry of celestial life was already been depicted on important Buddhist *stūpas* for some centuries prior to the Gupta period, for example, at Sāñcī and Amarāvatī.

Chapter 9: Iconography During the Gupta Age

Introduction

This chapter will address Hindu iconography of the Gupta-Vākāṭaka age, focusing predominantly on depictions of some of the popular myths or deities which feature at Ahichhatrā, Pawāyā, Bhītargāon and other brick temple sites of the period. Rather than being organised by material, region or period, the sculptures and relief carvings will be firstly grouped by affiliation, namely under the headings of Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva iconography; these two groups will then be subdivided according to theme. This approach affords us a better understanding of both the varieties and similarities in the treatment of myths or individual characters. The purpose of the rest of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, while this is by no means an exhaustive compendium of Hindu sculpture of the Gupta era, in part its purpose is to provide a solid iconographic context for a discussion of terracotta plaques and sculptures from Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā in the following two chapters. Secondly, particular consideration will be afforded to the substantial oeuvre of terracotta art, which is fascinating in its diversity and yet has received little scholarly attention. Original observations on the terracottas are made wherever possible and they are explored alongside the stone art of the period, and also, on occasion, the closely related sculpture produced by the neighbouring Vākāṭakas. It is hoped that this chapter will succeed in demonstrating that while there is a high level of consistency in the Hindu iconography of the period, there was also a degree of flexibility and room for creative expression. Moreover, the chapter will draw attention to the animated and frequently masterful rendering of myths or divine manifestations by the Gupta artists.

Great importance is attached to Gupta art in part because religious iconography is acknowledged to have been formalised during this era. Emphasising the significance of this, Meister comments that ‘the development of iconic formulas guaranteed the *identity* of the image with its meaning, without restricting further evolution or the transformation of myth.'[1] Moreover, Coomaraswamy writes: 'iconographic types, and compositions, still variable in the Kuṣāṇa period, are now standardized in forms whose influence extended beyond the Ganges valley…'[2] This statement, however, needs revision as the standardization of iconography was largely achieved only by the close of the Gupta age. During the earlier half of the period especially, there was still a significant degree of variation and experimentation when it came to the treatment of myths or deities. Arguably, this is most noticeable in terracotta art.

Vaiṣṇava Images

Viṣṇu

The Metropolitan Museum in New York is home to a fine terracotta sculpture of a four-armed Viṣṇu (26 x 10.2 x 4.4 cm) from Uttar Pradesh, dating to the fifth century CE (Fig. 9.1a). The god is depicted standing with a halo behind his head. He wears an ornate *kirīṭa mukuṭa* or a conical style of crown typical of Viṣṇu images, and an abundance of jewellery suggesting that this sculpture dates to the mature Gupta period.[3] A long *vanamāla* (floral garland) – an attribute of Viṣṇu – is draped around his body. He wears an asymmetric striped *dhotī* reaching down to his knees. In his upper right hand he holds a lotus flower and in his lower right hand a *gadā* (mace). In his upper left hand he holds a *śaṅkha* (conch), and in his lower left hand a *cakra* (discus). The moulding of the sculpture is so delicate that even the fingernails and toenails of the god have been depicted. The iconography and style of this image is similar to many large-scale stone sculptures made for the purpose of being worshipped in the inner sanctum of a temple; thus it might be imagined that this terracotta Viṣṇu belonged to a small shrine – possibly a family shrine.

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[1] Michael Meister, 'Indian Seeing and Western Knowing: an Art-Historian's Perspective', in *Śrī Nāgābhinandanam* vol. 1, ed. by L. K. Srinivasan and S. Nagaraju (Bangalore: M. S. Nagaraja Rao Felicitation Committee, 1995), p. 157-170 (p. 166).

[2] Ananda Coomaraswamy (1927) cited in Pal, *Indian Sculpture Volume I*, p. 211.

[3] On the whole, images of deities produced during the early Gupta period tend to be portrayed wearing a single necklace and fewer arm and ankle ornaments.

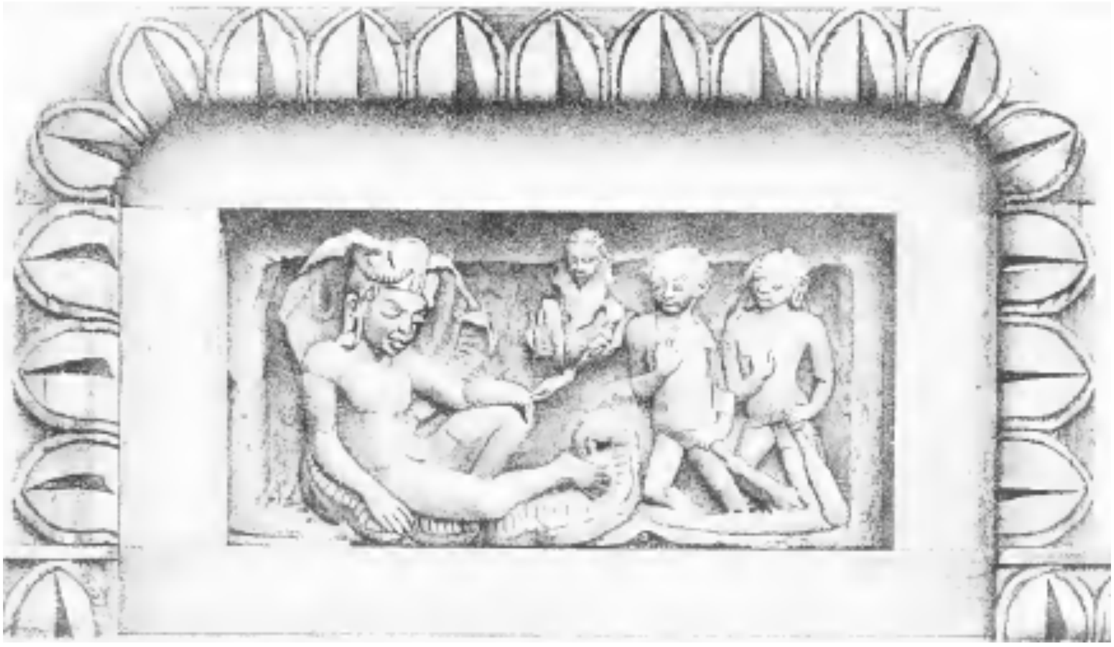
9.1. (a) A terracotta sculpture of Viṣṇu with four arms. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum, New York; (b) a four-armed Viṣṇu from Ahichhatrā. National Museum, New Delhi.

9.2. (a) Fragment of a terracotta plaque depicting a four-armed standing Viṣṇu from Ahichhatrā. Reserve collection of the State Museum, Allahabad; (b) Head of Viṣṇu from Ahichhatrā. Government Museum, Mathurā.

This type of plaque is not at all uncommon, for instance an endearing though less refined version of a standing Viṣṇu (17.78 cm) from Ahichhatrā ACIV is on display at the National Museum in New Delhi (Fig. 9.1b). Likewise, the fragment of a similar plaque from Ahichhatrā is kept in the reserve collection of the Allahabad State Museum (Fig. 9.2a). In addition, the Government Museum in Mathurā houses a Gupta period terracotta plaque fragment from Ahichhatrā, depicting a small and delicately moulded head of Viṣṇu wearing a *kirīṭa mukuṭa* (Fig. 9.2b).

Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa

Most of the mythological themes depicted on Gupta temples are sourced from the epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, other *purāṇic* myths, or, frequently, from stories of the Devī later featured in the *Devīmāhātmyam*. Excluding monuments with other affiliations, Bhītargāon, the Śiva temple at Ahichhatrā (Bhimgaja or ACI), and to a certain extent the monument at Pawāyā, are among the only brick temples (or temple ruins) of the Gupta period to have retained enough material to form even a partial understanding of each of their iconographic schemes. On occasion whole groups of terracotta plaques materialise but the findspot is not recorded. Many of the panels at Bhītargāon depict myths related to Viṣṇu and his avatars Kṛṣṇa and Rāma. Among the plaques is a characterful depiction of Viṣṇu Anantaśayana, housed at the Indian Museum in Kolkata (Fig. 9.3). Brahmā, shown here with only one head, is seated on a long stemmed lotus hovering above Nārāyaṇa, who is wearing nothing but a crown, while the club wielding demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha, dressed in animal skin tunics, complete the scene. This plaque represents a myth found in many texts. A version in the *Mahābhārata*, for example, narrates that while Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa was asleep on Ananta (also known as Śeṣa), the demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha – made of *rajas* (passion) and *tamas* (darkness) respectively – stole the four Vedas from the creator god Brahmā. Viṣṇu awoke and slew the demons, consequently becoming known as Madhusūdana, or slayer of Madhu (Mbh 12.348). In another version recounted in the *Mahābhārata*, the demons threaten Brahmā but there is no mention of the *vedas* (MBh 3.202).



9.3. Lithograph of the Viṣṇu Anantaśayana panel from Bhītargāon.[4]

This is a popular theme in the Gupta period, and undoubtedly the most splendid surviving depiction of the myth is carved in high relief in a niche panel measuring 1.49 x 1.16 m on the south face of the Deogaṛh temple (Fig. 9.4).[5] In this image Nārāyaṇa and Brahmā are joined by a host of other deities. In the upper register sits Kārttikeya on a peacock, the king of the gods Indra riding an elephant, Brahmā on a lotus, Śiva and Pārvatī on Nandi, and a flying male figure holding damaged articles. Beneath them the four-armed Nārāyaṇa reclines on the coils of Ananta. The god is adorned with lavish jewellery, a *kirīṭa mukuṭa* (crown), and a *vanamāla* (garland); the seven-headed hood of the serpent forms a canopy over his upper body (Fig. 9.5). He leans on one of his elbows, resting his head in his hand while his consort Lakṣmī massages his foot (Fig. 9.6). To her rear stands a second consort, Bhūdevī, the personification of the earth, holding a *chowry* (fly-whisk).[6] Among the assemblage is Viṣṇu's vehicle, Garuḍa, with a snake entwined around his neck. Beneath Nārāyaṇa stand a row of six figures, each holding a different pose. Madho Sarup Vats has identified the four figures on the right as representing the *āyudhapuruṣas* (personified-weapons of Viṣṇu), Kaumodakī, Sudarśana (or Cakrapuruṣa), Śārṅgastrī,

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[4] Reproduced in Cunningham, *Report of Tours*, Plate XVII. For a good quality reproduction of this plaque see Okada and Zephir, p. 52.

[5] Vats, p. 14.

[6] Fly-whisk is *cāmara* in Sanskrit.

and Nandaka, while the two figures on the left represent the demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha carrying swords or clubs.[7] The treatments of the faces in the figurative relief sculptures are homogeneous, be the subject a god, goddess, attendant, or *asura*. The coiffures, hair ornaments and jewellery on the other hand are varied and exquisite.

9.4. Plaque depicting Viṣṇu Anantaśayana carved in high relief on the south face of the late-fifth century temple at Deogaṛh, Uttar Pradesh. The panel measures 1.49 x 1.16 m. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

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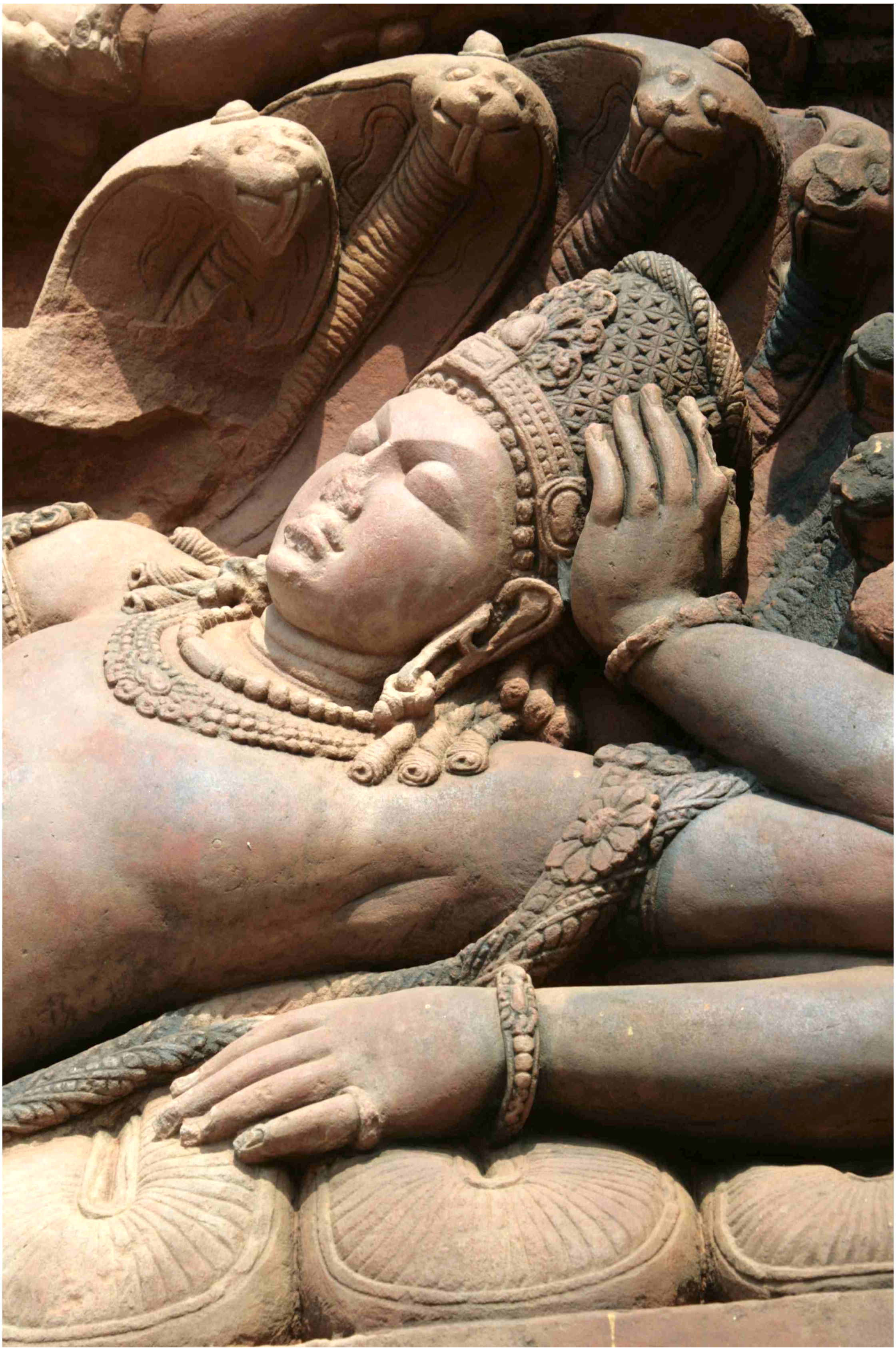
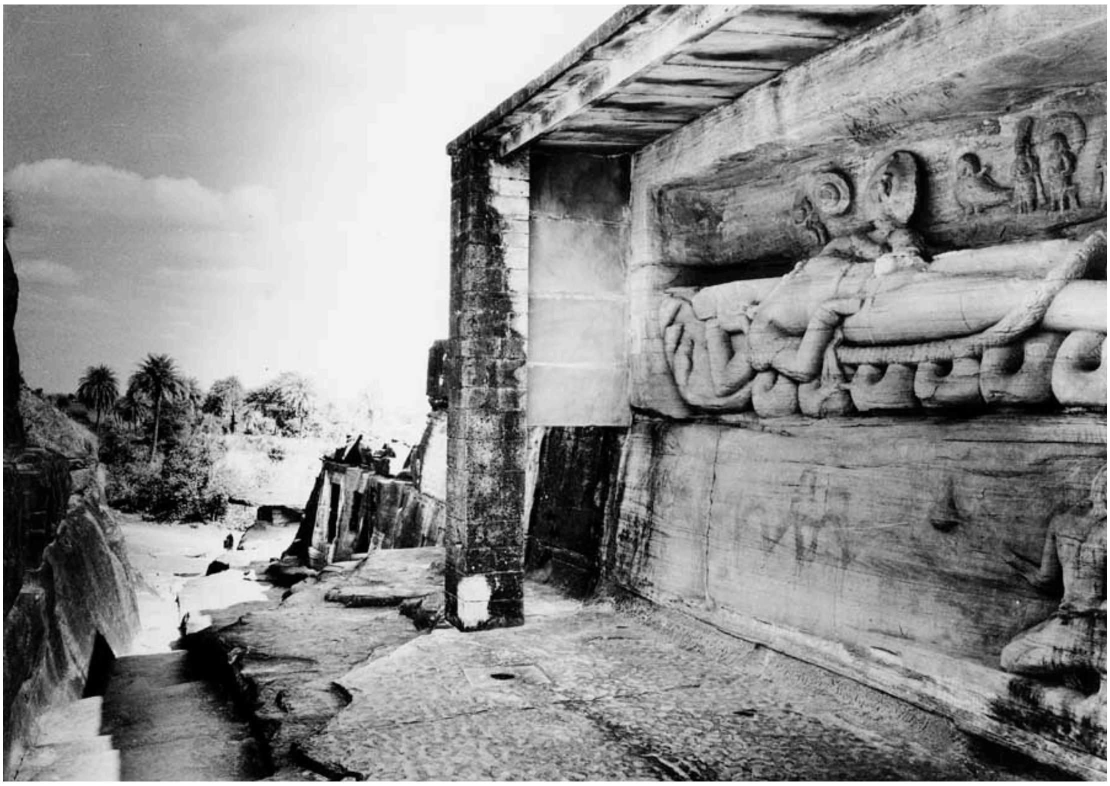
[7] Ibid., p. 15.



9.5. Detail of plaque depicting Viṣṇu Anantaśayana carved in high relief on the south face of the late-fifth century temple at Deogaṛh, Uttar Pradesh. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

9.6. Detail of plaque depicting Viṣṇu Anantaśayana carved in high relief on the south face of the late fifth century temple at Deogaṛh, Uttar Pradesh. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

This same myth is depicted on Cave 13 at Udayagiri, where Willis argues that it either formed part of or commemorated a complex royal ritual (Fig. 9.7).[8]



9.7. The early-fifth century Nārāyaṇa panel in Cave 13 at Udayagiri. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

Udayagiri is known to have been an important centre for astronomy in early India and Willis has demonstrated how the Nārāyaṇa panel ties in with this.[9] The large relief is situated in a niche on the cliff face and depicts a four-armed Nārāyaṇa asleep, stretched out on the concertinaed coils of Ananta (Fig. 9.8). Beneath the feet of the god kneels a worshipper holding a censer (Fig. 9.9).[10] He tilts his worn head back, looking upwards toward the object of his devotion.

The panel sits in the shadows, overlooked as it is by a large cliff face. Around the time of the summer solstice, however, the image is bathed in sunlight. This in part supports Willis's argument that the panel is intertwined with the *varṣāmāsavrata*

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[8] Willis, *The Archaeology*, pp. 33-36.
[9] See ibid., pp. 10-78.
[10] Ibid., p. 31.

ritual,[11] a tradition which may have had its origins in the Gupta period.[12] Viṣṇu sleeps for four months of each year, and the *varṣāmāsavrata* celebrates the sleeping and waking of the god.[13] Viṣṇu's repose is lyrically referred too in Kālidāsa's Sanskrit poem, the *Meghadūta*. In this passage a *yakṣa* – the poem's protagonist – announces that his exile will culminate upon the waking of Viṣṇu:

> Śārṅga-armed Viṣṇu sleeps on Śeṣa,
>
> And when he wakes my exile ends.
>
> Thus, my dear, please close your eyes
>
> And muddle through the next four months.
>
> Under the cool, full moon of autumn,
>
> We'll slake our starved desires.[14]

An inscription on the outer face of Cave 6, dated to 401 CE, suggests that the putting to sleep of Viṣṇu was honoured at Udayagiri during the reign of Candragupta II.[15] This ceremony takes place on the eleventh day of the month of *Āṣāḍha* (June-July), around the time of the summer solstice.[16] Interestingly, in June 401 CE, on the day when Nārāyaṇa was due to be put to sleep, the relief panel, or at least the space it occupies, would have been bathed in moonlight.[17] Moreover, based on an inscription at the site, Willis asserts that the worshipper depicted at the base of the relief panel is the ruler Candragupta II himself – Candragupta meaning "moon-protected."[18] The sheer attention to detail that has been devoted to the iconography, to the positioning of

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[11] This ritual is outlined in the early Bhāgavata text, the *Viṣṇudharmāh*. Described by Willis, *The Archaeology*, pp. 31-32.

[12] Ibid., p. 31.

[13] Ibid., p. 31.

[14] Cited in Willis, *The Archaeology*, p. 32.

[15] The inscription is dated to the Gupta year 82, or 401 CE. Willis, *The Archaeology*, p. 33.

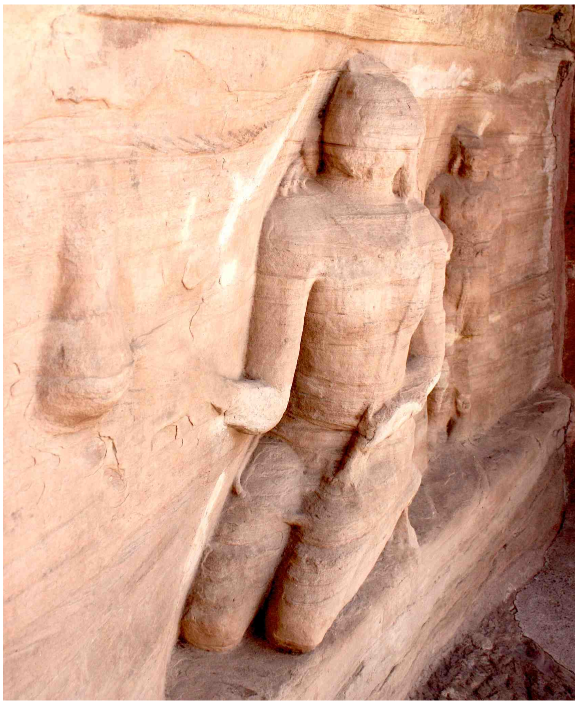
[16] Ibid., p. 31.

[17] Ibid., p. 35.

[18] Ibid., p. 35. In a forthcoming publication, Alexis Sanderson has questioned Willis's argument for this figure being a representation of Candragupta. For example, the latter has translated *paramabhāgavata* as meaning "the supreme devotee of Viṣṇu", assuming then that this epithet must be referring to the Gupta ruler. The correct translation of *paramabhāgavata*, however, is "supremely devoted to bhagavat". That is not to say that the figure depicted is definitely not the Gupta ruler, but it does question Willis's shaky evidence in drawing this conclusion. Many thanks to Alexis Sanderson for generously sharing his thoughts on the subject with me.

the reliefs, and to the engineering at the site is extraordinary, and demonstrates the creativity, ingenuity and intellect of the Guptas, and to an extent their predecessors.

9.8. Detail of relief panel from Cave 13 at Udayagiri, showing Nārāyaṇa's head resting on Ananta.



9.9. Detail of relief panel from Cave 13 at Udayagiri, showing worshipper and attendant figure.

The follow-up to this scene with Viṣṇu slaying Madhu and Kaiṭabha is depicted at Bhītargāon (Fig. 9.10). The composition is dynamic and animated – the demons lie backwards over the lap of the seated, four-armed Viṣṇu. With his lower two hands, the god holds each demon by the throat; in the surviving upper hand he holds a *cakra*. Madhu and Kaiṭabha wear spotted tunics, probably representing animal skins. Their faces are identical and well preserved.

9.10. Panel on the temple at Bhītargāon depicting Viṣṇu slaying Madhu and Kaiṭabha.

The Sages Nara and Nārāyaṇa

The sages Nara and Nārāyaṇa are depicted in a large relief panel at Deogaṛh and on the *śikhara* at Bhītargāon. Arguably, the sages are also the topic of one of the plaques from the pyramidal Śiva monument at Ahichhatrā, and we will return to this in Chapter 11. A further two images, namely a terracotta plaque housed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and a worn stone panel on a lintel from Nagari in Rajasthan[19] have previously been identified as depicting the two sages.

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[19] Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, p. 134 and p. 141. The Nagari panel depicts a pair of two-armed male figures seated side by side, both in *lalitāsana* pose. The ascetics hold their right hands in *abhaya mudrā*, and place their left hands on their thighs. There is a smaller, very worn figure to the rear on the righthand side of the panel. There is an animal kneeling at the base of the panel, probably a lion. All other details are lost. Given the context of the rest of the lintel, which portrays some of the exploits of Arjuna who is often associated with Sage Nara, it is quite possible that Nara and Nārāyaṇa are represented here.

Ṛṣis (sages) are intermediaries between gods and men. Moreover, they are at the same time householders and renunciants, effortlessly balancing two seemingly contradictory lifestyles.[20] Nara and Nārāyaṇa are somewhat different to most *ṛṣis*, however, since they are inseparable forms of Lord Viṣṇu. The god splits himself into Nara and Nārāyaṇa, but it is Nārāyaṇa who remains closer to Viṣṇu (hence his being four-armed), and is the embodiment of the perfect *yogi*. Viṣṇu's *avatāra*, Kṛṣṇa is sometimes associated with Nārāyaṇa. Nara on the other hand is the warrior, the preserver of *dharma*, and the ideal king. Arjuna is sometimes connected with him.[21]

The textual history of Nara and Nārāyaṇa is varied and sometimes confused. The sages feature a number of times in the *Mahābhārata*. In one myth, for example, King Dambodbhava, who had already vanquished the earth, relentlessly insisted that the sages take up arms against him. After much initial resistance, Nara eventually slew the king's entire army, using blades of grass in place of arrows (MBh 5.96). In this same myth it is mentioned that Nārāyaṇa is more powerful than Nara (MBh 5.96). Another myth tells how Nārāyaṇa, 'the soul of the universe,' took his birth in 'quadruple form' as Nara, Nārāyaṇa, Hari and Kṛṣṇa; they were born as sons of Dharma. Of these four, Nara and Nārāyaṇa devoted themselves to severe penance in a Himalayan hermitage by the name of Badarī. The sages travelled to the hermitage on eight-wheeled chariots formed from the five primordial elements. According to the *ṛṣi* Nārada, here the sages become 'the highest refuge of the universe' (MBh 12.335). In 3.270 of the *Mahābhārata* we are told that Arjuna is Nara, and that he 'had practised penances of old in the Vadari forest.' Another myth in 12.343 recounts how Śiva, after having destroyed Dakṣa's sacrifice, flung his trident in such a way that it travelled as far as the Badarī hermitage and pierced Sage Nārāyaṇa in the chest. The sage, whose hair turned green, returned the trident to Śiva. Incensed, Śiva charged at the sages. Nārāyaṇa took Śiva by the throat, which became dark, and thus the latter is known as Śitikaṇṭha. The sages appear in the *Viṣṇudharmapurāṇa* (VP) and, as already mentioned, in the later *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*. In these texts the ascetics

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[20] Madeleine Biardeau,'"Nara/ Nārāyaṇa"', in *Asian Mythologies*, ed. by Yves Bonnefoy, 2nd edn (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 1st edn 1991), pp. 78-79 (p. 79).

[21] Ibid., p. 79.

are considered to be minor incarnations of Viṣṇu.[22] A myth told in both of the *purāṇas* is that of the birth of the heavenly *apsarā* Urvaśī (VdP 1.129, 1-9 and III.35, 1-8 and VP cited in Pal). The myth begins with Indra feeling threatened by the growing power of the sages. In order to try and diminish their power he sends several lovely nymphs to the hermitage to tempt the sages out of meditation.[23] Demonstrating his immense power and detachment, however, Sage Nārāyaṇa proceeds to create the most beautiful nymph of all – Urvaśī – by drawing her outline in mango juice on his thigh. In the *Viṣṇudharmapurāṇa*, Sage Nārāyaṇa roared with laughter after he had foiled Indra's plot, and 'the entire universe was revealed in his mouth, thereby indicating that he was a manifestation of Viṣṇu'.[24] The *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* (III.76, 1-5) gives instructions on how the sages must be depicted in art. According to the text, Nara is to be two-armed and green in colour. Nārāyaṇa is to have four arms and to be blue in colour. Badarī, abundant with fruits, should also be portrayed. The sages should carry rosaries, be clothed in black antelope skins, and wear their hair coiled in a topknot. They should be seated on an eight-wheeled chariot – presumably the vehicle described in the *Mahābhārata*. Lastly, Hari should be like Nara, and Kṛṣṇa like Nārāyaṇa. Interestingly, none of the images surviving from the Gupta period depict the two ascetics seated on a chariot.

The surviving Gupta period reliefs differ quite significantly from one another. In a panel situated in a niche on the east face of the Deogaṛh temple, for example, both figures are seated on benches in a forest hermitage (Fig. 9.11). The four-armed Sage Nārāyaṇa sits on the left hand side of the panel and holds a rosary (*akṣamālā*), a water pot (*amṛta ghaṭa*) and what might be identified as the tapered stem of a flower.[25] Although worn, the head of a drooping or bell shaped flower is just about perceptible above Nārāyaṇa's hand. His lower right hand is held to his chest in *vitarka mudrā* (the gesture of teaching) and a family of deer sit at his feet. His hair is matted and worn in a convoluted topknot. The two-armed Nara, also sporting a typically ascetic coiffure, holds a rosary and wears an antelope skin across his chest. A lion lies in blissful repose beneath his bench.

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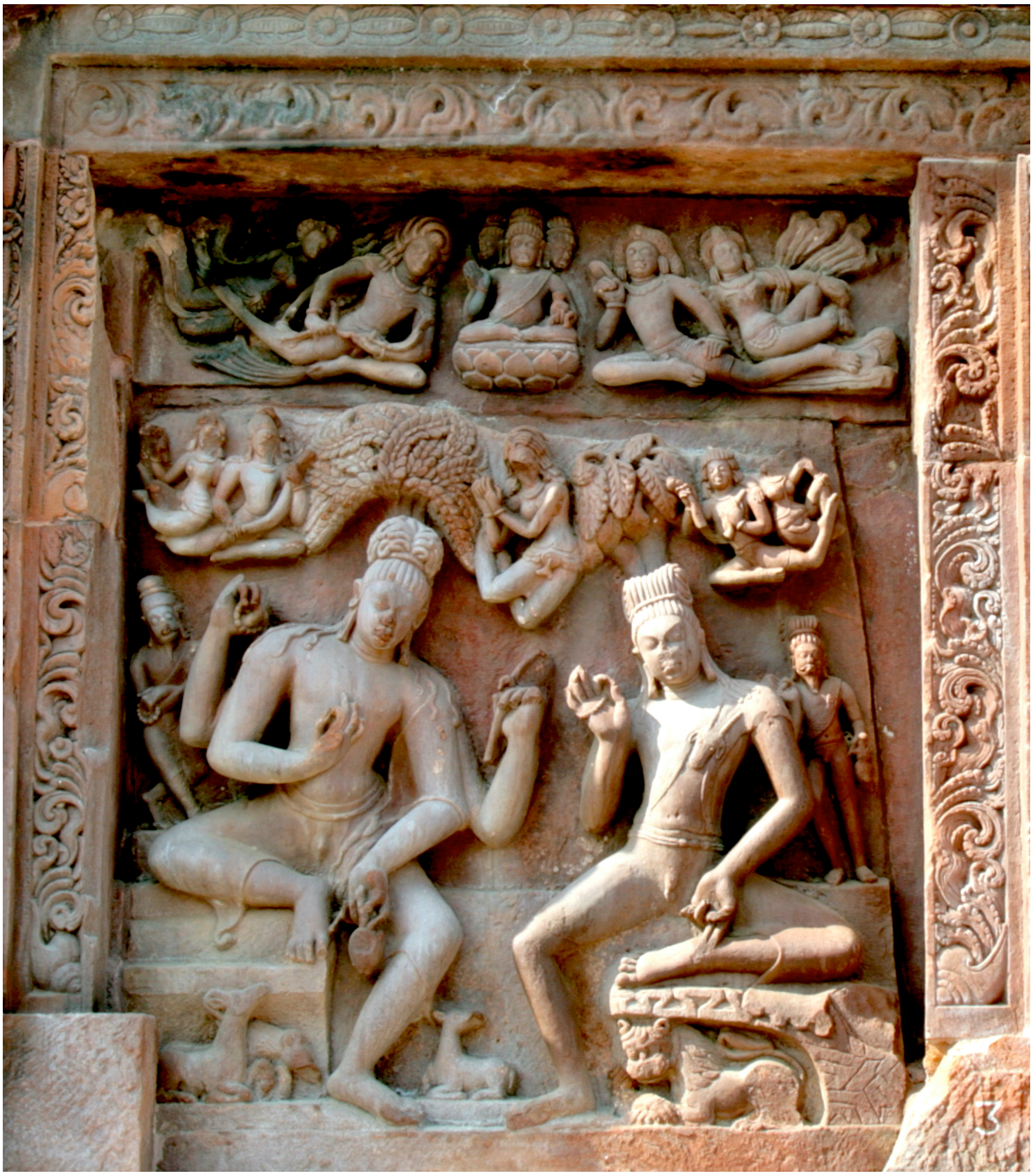
[22] Ibid., p. 78.

[23] Ibid., pp. 78-79.

[24] Cited in Pal, *Notes on*, p. 79.

[25] Vats, p. 14. Thanks are also owed to Hans Bakker for his thoughts on the flower.

Behind each of the sages is a small bearded attendant figure. In order to demonstrate the hierarchy of the two figures, Nārāyaṇa is on a slightly larger scale than Nara. Moreover, although each sage has a tree behind him, Nārāyaṇa's is more luxuriant than his companion's and forms an arc over his head. In the upper register of the panel sits Brahmā on a lotus flanked by *mithuna* (loving couples) (Fig. 9.12).



9.11. Plaque depicting Nara and Nārāyaṇa carved in high relief on the east face of the late-fifth century temple at Deogaṛh, Uttar Pradesh. The panel measures 1.77 x 1.19 m. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

That the sages were chosen as the subject for one of only three large niche panels on the walls of the Daśāvatāra temple at Deogaṛh certainly demonstrates their importance during this period, or at least in this region.

9.12. Celestials in the upper right hand corner of the Nara Nārāyaṇa plaque on the east face of the temple at Deogaṛh, Uttar Pradesh. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

9.13. Terracotta plaque depicting the sages Nara and Nārāyaṇa in a niche on the tower of the fifth century temple at Bhītargāon in Uttar Pradesh. The panel measures 47 x 52 cm. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

The sages in the terracotta panel from Bhītargāon are headless, but besides this the plaque is intact and measures 47 x 52 cm (Fig. 9.13).[26] Nārāyaṇa is four-armed and shares a bench with Nara. Several diminutive but voluptuous *apsarās* flock around the sages, trying to tempt them out of meditation. One of the nymphs even stands on Nārāyaṇa's lap. This latter figure could be a representation of the heavenly *apsarā* Urvaśī, whom the sage creates out of his thigh.

The terracotta plaque at the LACMA depicts two sages, but in this instance it is not possible to establish who is who, since they are both two-armed (Fig. 9.14). The characters are seated on benches or stools.

9.14. Drawing illustrating a Gupta period terracotta plaque in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The plaque depicts two sages, one of whom is reading from a scroll.

They wear their matted hair in topknots while some loose locks fall onto their shoulders. Both have antelope skins draped over their left arms. A tree and a wicker

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[26] Zaheer, p. 93.

stand separate the sages.[27] The figure on the right of the panel holds a scroll and appears to be reading to his companion. Interestingly one of the sages has a rotund belly, while the other is emaciated with his ribs displayed. The figure on the right is sporting a long pointed beard, and his companion may have also been bearded originally. Although considerably less refined and detailed than the Deogaṛh depiction, this panel is nevertheless animated to a degree that is difficult to capture in stone. Pal writes at length on this plaque, describing the two characters as Nara and Nārāyaṇa.[28] Although this interpretation cannot be dismissed outright, there is reason to suppose that in actuality a different pair of sages have been represented here, possibly, for example, Vālmīki and Bharadvāja. This theory is based on the premise that none of the artefacts or features that distinguish Nara and Nārāyaṇa from other ascetics are portrayed here - for instance, the wild animals which feature in the Deogaṛh panel are not depicted, and moreover, Sage Nārāyaṇa is generally shown with four arms during the Gupta period. Indeed, it is his multiple limbs that make him recognisable and that differentiate him from Nara. In addition, the presence of the scroll in the LACMA plaque does not, as far as I am aware, accord with any textual reference to the two sages.

A pillar relief at Deogaṛh depicts a pair of two-armed ascetics – both bearded and emaciated and seated in profile on stools (Fig. 9.15). Between the figures is a tripod described by Vats as holding a water flask. Again, the absence of extra limbs suggests

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[27] Pal, ‘Notes on’, p. 78. In light of its form and the indeterminate object placed on top of the stand, it is possible that this is in actuality a *bali-pitha* (offering altar).

[28] This panel does not conform to the dictates of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* which describes Nārāyaṇa as having four arms, and Nara as having two arms. *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* III.76, 1-5. Pal has dated the panel to around the mid-sixth century CE which would take it into the post-Gupta period, although he still calls it Gupta and has also suggested that it might pre-date the Deogaṛh relief which is confusing (Pal, ‘Notes on’, p. 79). Moreover, based on style, and a supposed similarity to a terracotta fragment depicting Agni, on display at the National Museum, New Delhi (Fig. 11.2), Pal believes that this relief panel comes from Ahichhatrā. The surface layer of much of the face and torso of the Ahichhatrā Agni has flaked off, leaving little with which to compare the LACMA plaque. What remains of Agni’s eyes, are fairly similar to those of the sages, while the style of the clothing and hair is different. Pal also argues that because Dakṣa’s sacrifice is depicted at Ahichhatrā, it is all the more likely that the LACMA plaque originated there, since a myth in the *Mahābhārata* links the two sages with the sacrifice. The plaque, however, is not depicting this particular story. While there may be a vague stylistic affinity with some terracotta sculpture from Ahichhatrā, we cannot be sure that this was the original findspot (Pal, ‘Notes on’, p. 79).

that these characters do not represent Nara Nārāyaṇa. Vats tentatively identifies the figure on the left as Vālmīki, narrating stories to Bharadvāja on the right.[29]

9.15. Relief carving in a lunette on a pillar from the late fifth century temple at Deogaṛh, Uttar Pradesh. The relief depicts two sages. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

Varāha

The boar Varāha is the third *avatāra* of Viṣṇu and was much beloved during the Gupta period (Fig. 9.16). An affiliation between Viṣṇu and the boar first arises in the *Ṛgveda* although Varāha is initially associated with the creator god Brahmā.[30] The myth is developed in both the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* and later in some of the *purāṇas*.[31] The relief depiction of Varāha emerging from the water on the wall of Cave 5 at Udayagiri is surely one of the artistic wonders of the Gupta age. Willis

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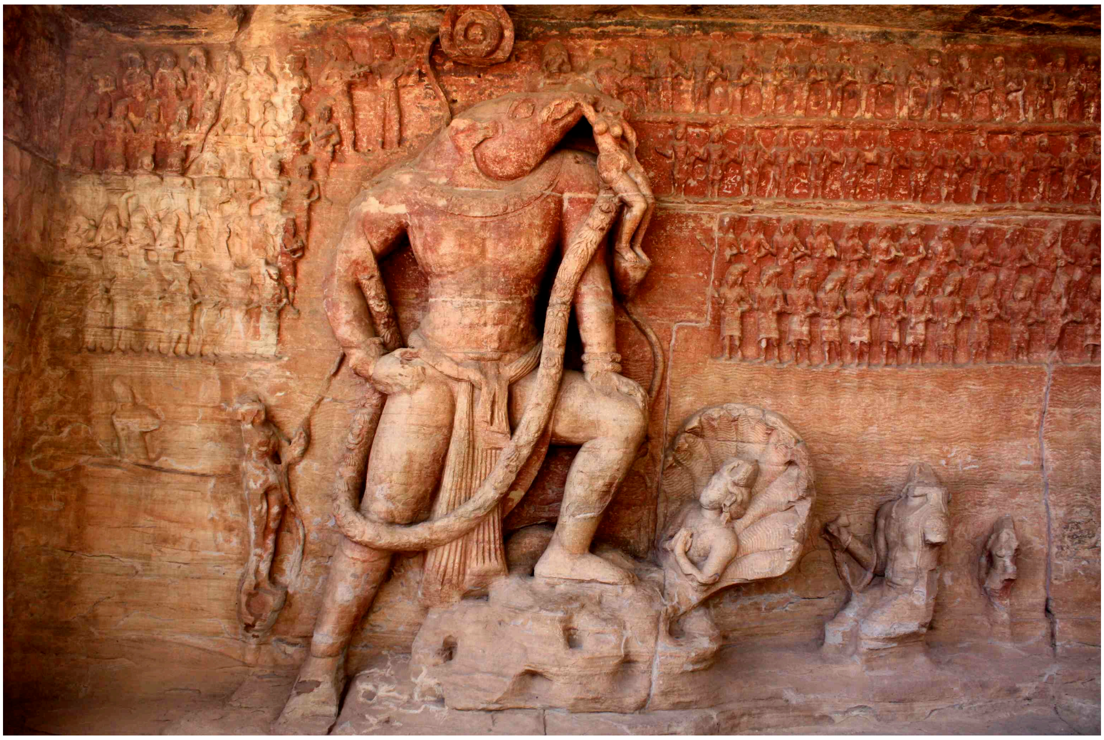
[29] Vats, p. 29.

[30] Catherine Becker, 'Not your average boar: The colossal Varāha at Erān', *Artibus Asiae*, 70 (2010), pp. 123-149 (p. 132 and p. 141).

[31] Ibid., p.123.

notes that the Varāha was the most celebrated image at the site, and during its heyday lotus-strewn water from the tank would have washed over the feet of the god; an act of reverence and visual splendour.[32]

In this large relief carving, the muscular figure of Varāha stands at the centre of the composition, naked but for a long floral garland (*vanamāla*) and a loincloth. He has the head of a boar and the body of a man, and thus in this instance he is called Nṛ-Varāha.[33] He places one foot on the coils of a nāga (serpent divinity) with a beautifully carved hood in high relief. In all likelihood, this is a representation of the nāga king Ananta.[34] Clinging to the snout or tusk of Varāha is the female personification of the earth, the goddess Bhūdevī (also known as Pṛthvī), whom the god has rescued from the clutches of the demon Hiranyākṣa. A much-eroded figure of Viṣṇu's consort, Lakṣmī, stands to Varāha's left and holds a long stemmed lotus above his head.



9.16. Relief on the back wall of Cave 5 at Udayagiri depicting Varāha standing on the coils of a nāga after having rescued Bhūdevī.

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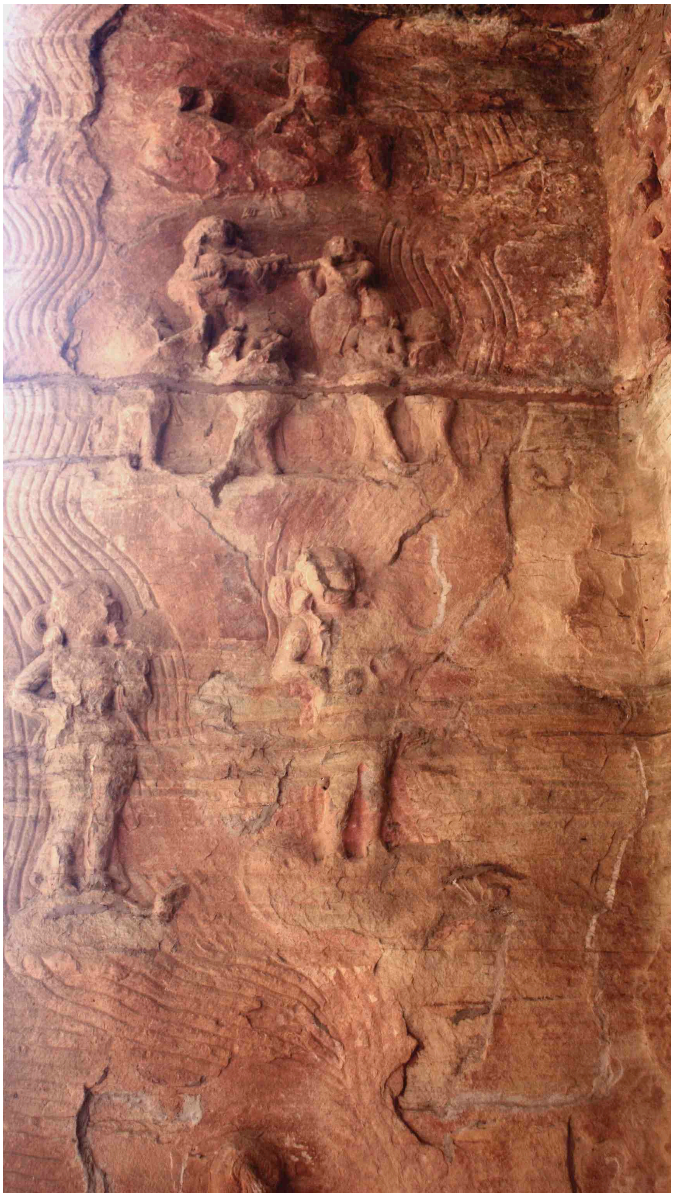
[32] Michael Willis, 'The Archaeology and Politics of Time', in *The Vākāṭaka Heritage - Indian Culture at the Crossroads*, ed. by Hans T. Bakker (Groningen: Egbert Forstern, 2004), pp. 33-58 (p. 42).
[33] Becker, p.125.
[34] Agrawala, *Gupta Art*, p. 30.

In the background are the rows of *ṛṣis* (holy men) also rescued by Varāha. On the wall adjoining the left hand side of the relief are carved several figures including a group of female musicians and a dancer (Fig. 9.17). Female musicians are not commonly found in early Indian art, although there is a group on the gateway lintel at Pawāyā, and on a stone fragment from Deogaṛh.[35] Even more significant, however, are the small figures of the river goddesses Gaṅgā and Yamunā whose waters are shown converging.



9.17. Left hand wall of Cave 5 with depictions of the river goddesses and a group of female musicians and dancers.

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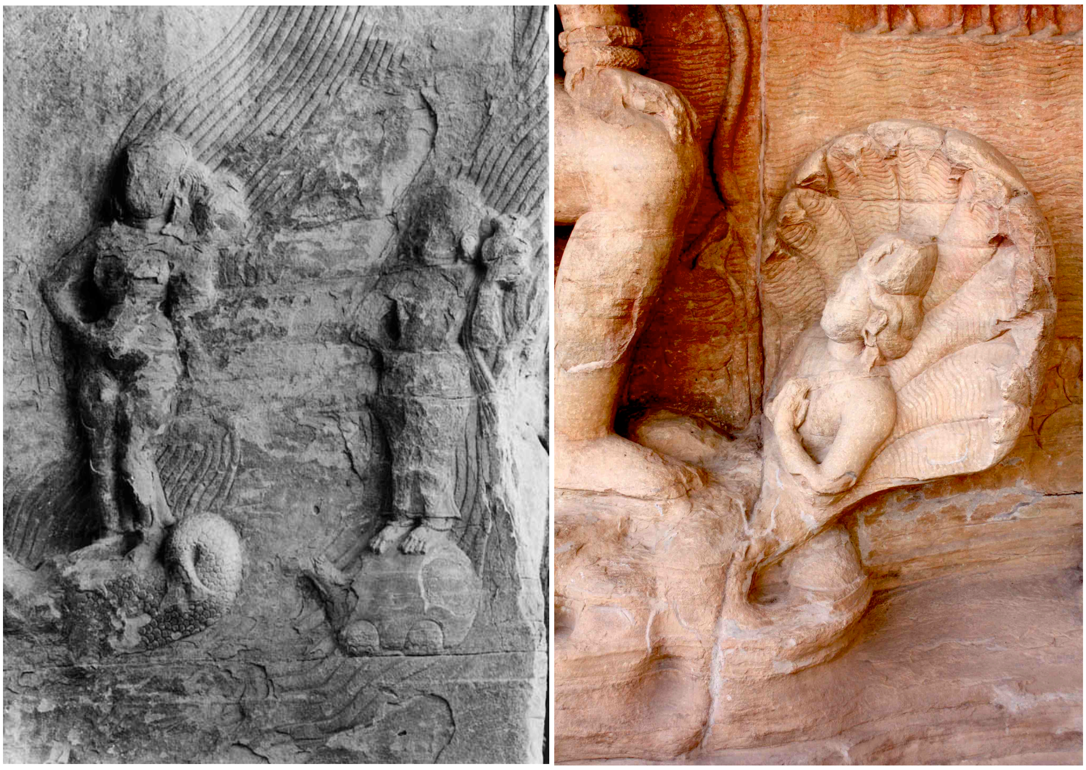
[35] The lintel from Pawāyā is at the Gujari Mahal Museum in Gwalior; the Deogaṛh fragment is in the collection of the National Museum, New Delhi.

The convergence occurs at holy Prayāga (modern day Allahabad). As Srinivasan recounts, '"There is no place", says the *Mahābhārata* (III.83.74) … "holier than Prayāga"'. By the time of the *Matsya Purāṇa*, one of the oldest *Purāṇa*s, the vicinity around Prayāga was recorded as being infused with sanctity.'[36] Moreover, Prayāga was most probably a capital of the Guptas and thus especially meaningful here.[37] Gaṅgā and Yamunā are depicted again on the right wall, emphasizing their importance (Fig. 9.18a).



9.18. Details of the relief from Cave 5 at Udayagiri; (a) Gaṅgā and Yamunā depicted on the right sidewall. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies; (b) a nāga king, possibly Ananta, holding his hands together in añjalimudrā.

Incidentally, the tradition of representing the river goddesses on temples seems to have had its *naissance* in this period.[38] As for the reverential nāga (Fig. 9.18b): Ananta is Viṣṇu's servant, and also incarnates as Lakṣmaṇa and Balarāma to accompany Viṣṇu's avatars Rāma and Kṛṣṇa.[39] Nāga is also the name for various

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[36] Srinivasan, p. 227.
[37] Willis, *The Archaeology*, p. 50.
[38] Agrawala, *Gupta Art*, p. 17.
[39] Swami Parameshwaranand, *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Purāṇas, Volume II* (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2001), p. 369.

groups of powerful rulers in early North India. As mentioned previously, the Allahabad *praśasti* of Samudragupta suggests that the Gupta ruler was especially proud of his victory over the Nāgas.[40] The Udayagiri relief may be an allegorical representation of the dominance of the Guptas – here symbolized by Varāha – over the Nāga dynasties represented by Viṣṇu's devoted servant Ananta.[41] This theory is strengthened by the presence of Garuḍa close to the depiction of Ananta. Garuḍa is the emblem of the Guptas, and is here portrayed clutching a serpent in his hands.[42] Of course, serpents are Garuḍa's traditional enemies, but the image could also be interpreted as a metaphor for the lordship of the Guptas over the once mighty Nāgas.

A colossal stone Varāha stands at Erān and is an immense three and a half metres in height and five metres in length; this is one of the earliest extant zoomorphic images of the deity (Fig. 9.19).[43] It once belonged to a simple shrine of which now only the foundations remain.[44] In contrast to the Udayagiri relief, here the rescued *ṛṣis* are carved directly onto the body of the boar. In typically Gupta fashion, the ascetics have been depicted with topknots, beards, slight frames, and each holding a water pot. The goddess Bhūdevī clings awkwardly to the tusk of Varāha. Of considerable interest are the figures depicted on the collar around the boar's neck. These are possibly the earliest extant representations of the twenty-seven or twenty-eight *nakṣatras* (lunar mansions in Vedic astrology).[45] Moreover, the *saptagrahas* (seven planets) personified by seven male figures are depicted on the chest of Varāha.[46] According to texts such as the *Matsya Purāṇa*, Varāha in his zoomorphic form is said to be a *Yajña* Varāha, or the embodiment of sacrifice.[47]

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[40] Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, p. 13.
[41] Shaw, 'Nāga Sculptures', p. 47.
[42] Agrawala, *Gupta Art*, p. 30.
[43] Becker, p.124.
[44] Ibid., p.123.
[45] Gerd J. R. Mevisson, 'Figurations of Time and Protection: Sun, Moon, Planets and other Astral Phenomena in South Asian Art', in *Figurations of Time in Asia*, ed. by Dietrich Boschung and Corinna Wessels-Mevissen (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2012), pp. 82-147 (p. 125); Nakṣatras are the lunar mansions of Indian astrology.
[46] Becker, p.130.
[47] Ibid., p.141. Becker points out that the Erān Varāha does not entirely resemble a *Yajña* Varāha. An inscription carved into the chest of the boar reveals that Dhanyaviṣṇu, a local ruler, commissioned the sculpture (see Becker, p. 129). Interestingly it is dated to the first year of the reign of the apparently merciless Hūṇa ruler, Toramāṇa, and as Catherine Becker writes, this attests 'to the displacement of Gupta authority and the rise of a new political power in central India.' Beneath the inscription is a damaged figure which may be a representation of Viṣṇu in his anthropomorphic form (see Becker,

9.19. Gupta period zoomorphic Varāha at Erān measuring 3.5 x 5 m. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

A fifth century Vākāṭaka zoomorphic Varāha is situated within a simple shrine – open on all four sides – at the pinnacle of the Ramtek hill (Rāmagiri) near Nagpur (Fig. 9.20). In contrast to the Erān Varāha, though, images have not been carved onto his hefty body. Fragments of a red-sandstone *āmalasāraka* lie nearby, and it is possible that it was positioned at the apex of this shrine.

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p.124).Toramāṇa may have been a Zoroastrian, worshipping the fire element and the sun. Based on this, Becker attempts to forge what may be a rather conjectural link between the solar symbolism of the boar and the sun worship of the new ruler: as though the boar was sculpted to commemorate or at least to please the new ruler (Becker, p.146). Her argument cannot be dismissed off hand but it should be reiterated that Varāha was popular throughout the Gupta period and that although this is one of the earlier zoomorphic representations of the god to survive, it is not the very first.

9.20. A fifth century CE stone image of Varāha at Ramtek in Maharasthtra.

A terracotta plaque depicting a Nṛ-Varāha survives in poor condition at Bhītargāon (77 x 65 cm) (Fig. 9.21). Although significant parts of the plaque are lost, the muscular upper body and thighs of the boar are well defined, and his stance is exactly like that of Varāha in the Udayagiri relief. To his rear is his consort Lakṣmī holding a lotus flower on a long stem. Part of a *vanamāla* has survived on the left thigh of the god. Only the lower half of Bhūdevī is extant, and Varāha appears to be holding her, rather than her clinging to his tusk in the usual manner.

9.21. Terracotta plaque depicting Varāha on the temple at Bhītargāon.

Visual Depictions of Myths from the *Rāmāyaṇa*

Innumerable stories from the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* were employed in the iconographic schemes of Gupta period temples.[48]As Gouriswar Bhattacharya writes:

> In this period the epic-hero Rāma was considered to be the model for the Indian Royalty. The Gupta rulers propagated the theory of the Divine Origin of Kingship, hence the expression, *parama-daivata*, the supreme deity, was used as an epithet of a ruler … and their subjects were led to believe that they were ideal kings like the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.[49]

The stance held by Bhattacharya and other scholars such as Pal is, however, rejected outright by Sheldon Pollock:

> Pal 1986-87, Vol. 1: 74 (cf. 232), asserts that "Ardent Vaiṣṇavas, the royal Guptas would naturally have chosen to model their standard portrait type on the idealized image of Rāma." But what evidence do we have that their existed an "idealized image" of Rāma in Gupta India? The paucity of representations in a recent survey (Williams 1982) implies instead the figure's irrelevance to Gupta-period artists.

Contrary to what Pollock asserts, artistic representations of Rāma or episodes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* abound in this period, and there cannot be any doubt that Rāma was

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[48] Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is composed of twenty-four thousand verses divided into seven books. The well-known story begins when Daśaratha - king of Ayodhyā - abdicates from the throne, naming his firstborn son, Rāma - the seventh *avatāra*, or part *avatāra* of Viṣṇu - as heir. The transition is not smooth, however, as Kaikeyī, the mother of Rāma's noble brother Bharata, is determined to see her own son on the throne. Unfortunately, Kaikeyī is owed a boon from her husband, and it is her wish that Rāma be exiled to the forest for fourteen years. Thus, Rāma leaves Ayodhyā accompanied by his wife Sītā and his dutiful younger brother Lakṣmaṇa. Forest life proves to be full of mishap, culminating in the abduction of Sītā by the demon king of Laṅkā, Rāvaṇa. In his campaign to rescue Sītā, Rāma is helped by monkey armies led by Hanūmāna and Sugrīva. The monkeys build a bridge to Laṅkā, following which a great battle with Rāvaṇa and his army ensues. Rāma succeeds in killing the *rākṣasa*, but a fairytale ending is not to be, as Rāma wrongly doubts Sītā's purity and although he eventually comes to realise that he was wrong to doubt her, his subjects remain distrustful. Thus, for the sake of his reputation, Sītā is banished. Sage Vālmīki gives her refuge in his hermitage where Rāma's twin sons, Lava and Kuśa, are born. Sītā eventually chooses to return into the womb of the earth, while Rāma, full of sorrow, returns to the heavens (see Paula Richman, 'Introduction: The Diversity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* Tradition', in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. by Paula Richman (Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 3-21 (pp. 5-7).

[49] Gouriswar Bhattacharya, 'Early Rāmāyaṇa Illustration from Bangladesh', *South Asian Archaeology 1987 Part 2. Proceedings on the Ninth International Conference of the Association of South Asian Archaeologists in Western Europe, held in Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Island of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice*, ed. by Maurizio Taddei (Rome: Istituto per il Medio e Estremo Oriente, 1990), pp. 1043-1065 (p. 1043).

extremely popular.[50] That the Gupta rulers modelled themselves on the legendary ideal king is speculative, but nevertheless likely, given their tendency to self-aggrandisement.

Stone Reliefs Illustrating the Rāmāyaṇa

Several stories from the *Rāmāyaṇa* are depicted on red sandstone panels from the *jagatī* of the temple at Deogaṛh. Among them are: Lakṣmaṇa disfiguring the *rākṣasī*, Śurpaṇakhā (Fig. 9.22a); Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā going into exile; Lakṣmaṇa garlanding the monkey Sugrīva; Rāma releasing Ahalyā from a curse (Fig. 9.22b); and a scene possibly depicting Rāvaṇa abducting Sītā.

9.22. Stone plaques from Deogaṛh: (a) Rāma releasing Ahalyā from a curse; (b) Rāma, Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa and Śurpaṇakhā. Both in the National Museum, New Delhi.

The first panel depicts Rāma, Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa and Śurpaṇakhā beneath a canopy of trees. Rāma is seated on a rock with his right hand in *abhaya mudrā*, while he holds a bow in his left hand. His matted hair is worn in a topknot, and his long ear lobes reach down to his shoulders. His expression is serene despite the unfolding drama. Across his chest is a *channavīra*, and quivers of arrows are worn strapped to his back. Beside

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[50] Sheldon Pollock, 'Ramayana and Political Imagination in India', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 52 (May, 1993), pp. 261-297 (p. 270).

him stands his consort Sītā, her stance following the arch of his bow. As with all of the figures depicted at Deogaṛh, Sītā's hair is worn in an elaborate and beautiful coiffure. With her left hand she clasps her right breast, while her right hand rests on her left hip in a protective gesture. No wonder, since out of lust for Rāma, Rāvaṇa's sister Śurpaṇakhā had planned to eat Sītā.[51] Lakṣmaṇa stands with his left arm outstretched, wielding a sword ready to slice off the nose of Śurpaṇakhā who kneels on the earth trying to push Lakṣmaṇa away. Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa are portrayed in a similar manner in the other panels, although the compositions are different.

A series of stone panels dating to the late Gupta period depicting scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* were found in the vicinity of Nāchnā. In comparison to the images from Deogaṛh, these images are quite simplistic in composition and the characters are rather wooden. They depict scenes such as Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa with Hanūmān, and the building of the causeway to Laṅkā.

Many superb sculptures and fragments were found during excavation work at the Vākāṭaka Śiva temple in Mansar: indeed, these are among the finest sculptural fragments in the history of South Asian art, and certainly rival anything that the neighbouring Guptas produced. Most of the sculptural finds from Mansar are fragmented and have lost attributes that would help in their identification. Nevertheless, Bakker tentatively identifies a few of the fragments as figures from the *Rāmāyaṇa*.[52] There is, for example, the animated head of a monkey and another head which Bakker tentatively interprets as being that of the bear Jāmbavat, who assists Rāma and Hanūmān in their rescue of Sītā (Figs. 9.23a and 9.23b). He suggests that a grimacing head with enormous teeth might portray the *rākṣasa* Virādha, while a second bust depicting an open-mouthed male figure holding his hands to his cheeks

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[51] Richman, p. 6.

[52] Bakker, *Mansar*. The *Rāmāyaṇa* appears to have been a popular theme at the court of the Pravarapura-Nandivardhana branch of the Vākāṭakas, as the Prakrit poem, the *Setubandha* (or *Rāvaṇavaha*), is said to have been composed here in the fifth century CE. Moreover, the poem is attributed to the ruler Pravaresvara, although the veracity of this claim is questionable (see Bisschop, 'Śaivism', p. 479). The *Setubandha* describes the building of the causeway to the kingdom of Laṅkā and is based on Vālmikī's *Rāmāyaṇa* (see Roy Jordaan, 'The Causeway Episode of the Prambanan *Rāmāyaṇa* Reexamined', in *From Laṅkā Eastwards, The Rāmāyaṇa in the Literature and Visual Arts of Indonesia*, ed. by Andrea Acri, H.M. Crease, and A. Griffiths (Leiden: KITLV, 2010), pp. 477-488 (p. 203).

could represent the *rākṣasa* Vibhīṣaṇa (brother of Rāvaṇa) in despair (Figs. 9.24a and 9.24b).

9.23. Sculptural fragments from Mansar: (a) head of a monkey, possibly Hanūmān or Sugrīva, or one of their soldiers; (b) head of a bear, possibly Jāmbavat. Both photographs courtesy of Sasai.

9.24. Sculptural fragments from Mansar: (a) possibly a depiction of the rākṣasa Virādha; (b) possibly a representation of the rākṣasa Vibhīṣaṇa in despair. Both photographs courtesy of Sasai.

Similar fragments from Pawāyā will be explored in Chapter 10. Bakker describes a male figure leaning gracefully against a rock as possibly depicting Rāma (Fig. 9.25). The figure is princely, in contrast to Gupta depictions of Rāma where he is often represented as ascetic and never without his bow and arrows. Bakker interprets a beautiful fragment of a male under a serpent canopy as portraying Lakṣmaṇa (Fig. 9.26). In the iconography of the Guptas, Lakṣmaṇa is usually depicted in a similar fashion to Rāma, without a multi-headed serpent canopy. There is also the possibility that this could be Balarāma/Saṅkarṣaṇa who is, incidentally, also depicted at Pawāyā.

Lastly, the heads of a couple of ascetics with matted hair are thought to be the sages Agastya and Bharadvāja.

9.25. A stone sculptural fragment from Mansar depicting a princely figure – possibly Rāma – reclining against a rock. Photograph courtesy of Sasai.

9.26. A sculptural fragment from Mansar depicting a nāga with a regal appearance – possibly Lakṣmaṇa or Balarāma/Saṅkarṣaṇa. Photograph courtesy of Sasai.

Terracotta Reliefs Illustrating the Rāmāyaṇa

LACMA houses a characterful inscribed terracotta fragment, which Pal believes may have originated from Nachar Khera (Fig. 9.27).[53] The Brāhmī inscription indicates that this is a representation of Rāma. Importantly, this is the earliest surviving inscription mentioning Rāma's name. In this image the exiled prince wears a tunic and a *channavīra*, with a quiver of arrows attached to his back. His right hand is held in *abhaya mudrā*, and his left hand clutches the remnants of a bow. This is a typical representation of the semi-divine royal.

9.27. Terracotta fragment inscribed with Gupta period Brāhmī script reading 'Rāma'. Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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[53] Pal, *Indian Sculpture Volume I*, p. 232. In actuality, the fragment housed in LACMA is different in style to the Nachar Khera terracottas and I do not think that they originate from the same temple, although the same region is certainly possible.

A few vibrant terracottas have survived from Śrāvastī (Saheth-Maheth), situated in northeast Uttar Pradesh. A crude but nevertheless lively plaque housed in the Lucknow State Museum, is labelled by the museum as depicting a scene from the *Rāmāyaṇa* portraying Hanūmān and Indrajit – a son of Rāvaṇa – in combat (Fig. 9.28).[54] The composition is dynamic: the character identified as Hanūmān, has his limbs splayed, and appears to be in mid-air, kicking his opponent with his right foot. The so-called Indrajit, his expression fierce, swings a sword above his head with his right hand. A vaguely triangular design has been etched onto the border in a haphazard manner.

9.28. A terracotta plaque from Śrāvastī possibly depicting Hanūmān and Indrajit in combat. State Museum, Lucknow.

A damaged terracotta plaque on the temple at Bhītargāon is believed to depict Sītā giving alms to Rāvaṇa (51 x 58 cm) (Fig. 9.29).[55] The composition is simple but vivid. It shows a female figure, now headless, stepping out of the doorway to her

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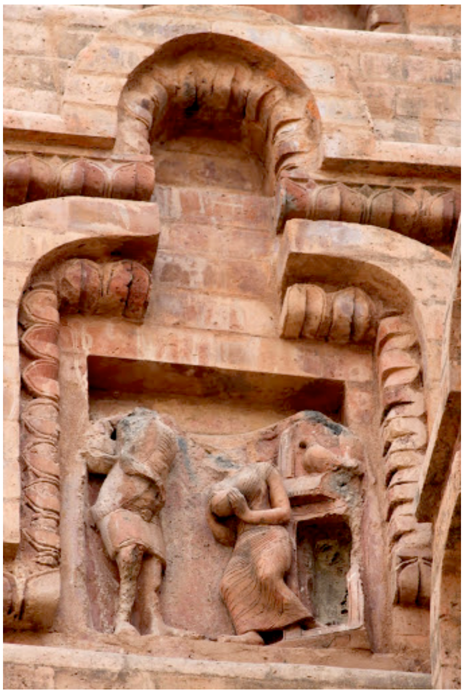
[54] This identification is a tentative one, since neither the monkey nor the man have been depicted with features or attributes by which to confidently identify them.

[55] Zaheer, p. 91.

house, one foot still inside the threshold. She carries a pot with both hands. Facing her is an emaciated headless male wearing a short *dhotī*. On a window ledge above the doorway sits a bird. This scene is probably depicting the poignant moment when Rāvaṇa comes to Sītā's abode in the forest disguised as a holy man. She welcomes him as a guest, only to be forcibly abducted.[56] The bird may be Jaṭāyu who later attempts to rescue Sītā.



9.29. A terracotta plaque on the temple at Bhītargāon, probably illustrating the episode in the Rāmāyaṇa in which Sītā offers alms to Rāvaṇa.

Terracotta Rāmāyaṇa Depictions from Jind

An energetic terracotta plaque from Jind in Haryana depicts the monkey brothers Bālī and Sugrīva in combat, a myth which features in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The muscular monkeys wear crowns and jewellery. The composition is vigorous, dynamic and successful. Another damaged terracotta panel from Jind bears an inscription on the lower border describing how the scene depicted is that of Hanūmān destroying the Aśōka-vāṭikā (*Aśōkavāṭikā hantā Hanūmān*) – a garden in the kingdom of Laṅkā where Sītā was held captive by Rāvaṇa.[57] When Hanūmān visited Laṅkā in search of Sītā, he destroyed much of the garden. Unlike in the previous panel from Jind, here

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[56] B. R. Kishore, *Ramayana* (New Delhi: Diamond Pocket Books, 2005), p. 71.

[57] Devendra Handa, *Sculptures from Haryana: Iconography and Style* (Delhi: Manohar, 2006), p. 110.

the monkey is depicted as hairy, and relatively slender. He is portrayed crushing trees underfoot and snapping trunks in half with his bare hands. The two panels from Jind were found about a kilometre apart, and must have been made by different ateliers, explaining the striking difference in style.[58]

Two beautiful terracotta plaques depicting scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, one of them a portrayal of the vulture Jaṭāyu's courageous but doomed attempt at rescuing Sītā from her abductor, Rāvaṇa, were mentioned in the previous chapter. This story is also depicted on a terracotta panel from Nachar Khera, Jind District, Haryana, where a series of around ten fragmented terracotta panels were discovered.[59] Some of the plaques bear verses from the *Rāmāyaṇa* on their borders in Brāhmī characters dating to the Gupta period.[60] Without these inscriptions it would be difficult to date the panels, as in some ways they are quite distinct from most Gupta terracottas. The characters invariably have enormous wide eyes, oval faces and relatively slender physiques, while the modelling of the plaques is exceptionally delicate and refined. One of the panels is virtually complete and is said to depict the three-headed demon Triśira, a son of Rāvaṇa, apparently flanked by two soldiers (Fig. 9.30).[61] Triśira sits in *lalitāsana* on a throne at the centre of the composition.[62] The scene is taking place in a pillared hall. It is unusual in Gupta period terracotta art to find architectural elements depicted in such detail. The left and right borders of the plaque are adorned with delicate floral medallions – a motif used frequently in the Nachar Khera plaques. We are in a most enviable position here, since the verse inscribed on the lower border tells us exactly which episode is unfolding. Triśira is being informed that Rāma has slain fourteen demons sent by Rāvaṇa.[63] The soldier seated on the right hand side of the plaque holds a fragmented sword with a semi-circular hilt in his right hand. He wears boots on his feet, reminiscent of the footwear worn by some male figures in Kuṣāṇa sculptures.

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[58] Ibid., p. 110.
[59] Ibid., p. 107. These terracottas are housed at the Gurukula Museum in Jhajjar, Haryana.
[60] Ibid., p. 107.
[61] The name of the demon is inscribed to the left of his heads (see Handa, p. 108).
[62] Handa describes the demon's sitting position as *sukhāsana* but this is incorrect (see Handa, p. 108).
[63] Ibid., p. 108. The text reads: *Chaturdaśa rākshasā sujitvā Rāmadhe yaśaḥ.*

9.30. Drawing depicting a damaged terracotta plaque from Nachar Khera illustrating the demon Triśira flanked by two figures. The script is written across the lower border on the plaque, and 'Triśira' is inscribed next to the three-headed demon on the right hand side.[64]

Triśira is said to be the subject of another panel at Nachar Khera (Fig. 9.31).[65] Only the central portion of this plaque survives and it depicts the three-headed, multi-armed demon seated on a chariot pulled by a horse, of which only the rear end is extant.[66]

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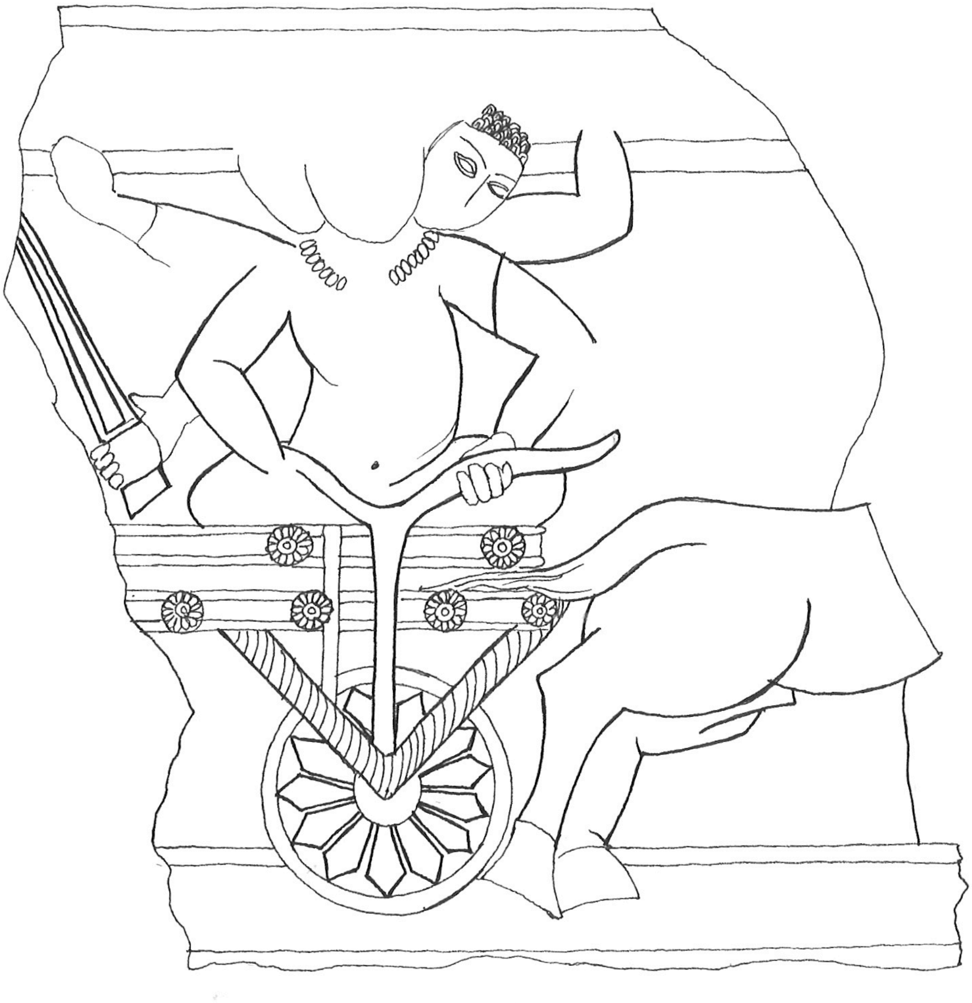
[64] Ibid., p. 108.

[65] Ibid., pp. 108-9. There is no surviving inscription on this plaque and thus we should be cautious about assuming that it represents Triśira, though, given the iconography of the plaque, it is quite likely that it represents the next episode in the story of the demon.

[66] Only one of Triśira's heads survives but the stumps of the other two heads are still visible. This type of chariot is also depicted in a terracotta fragment from Newal (the current whereabouts of the Newal plaque is not known to me, but there is a drawing in Cunningham's, *Report of Tours*, Plate XVIII).

The demon is clearly in combat here – perhaps with Rāma who eventually slays him. Most of his six hands are damaged but in one he holds a sword.



9.31. Drawing depicting a damaged terracotta plaque from Nachar Khera illustrating the demon Triśira on a chariot, wielding weapons.

Another particularly lovely terracotta fragment possibly depicts Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā on their way to the forest, Pañcavaṭī (Fig. 9.32).[67] Rāma would have been depicted to the right of his consort, but this part of the plaque is lost, as is the body of Sītā.[68] The two surviving characters both have a sweet countenance. Another panel modelled in

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[67] Handa, p. 107.
[68] Ibid., p. 107.

the same style depicts the fateful moment when Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa spot the golden deer.[69]

9.32. A drawing of a fragmented terracotta plaque from Nachar Khera, probably depicting Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā on their way to the forest, Pañcavaṭī.

A Re-discovered Hoard of Terracottas?

A very damaged plaque *in situ* on the Bhītargāon temple depicts Viṣṇu holding a *cakra* in his only surviving hand and riding on the back of his vehicle Garuḍa (Fig. 9.33). This same theme is depicted on a fragmented plaque in the Brooklyn Museum. Viṣṇu seated on an airborne Garuḍa is accompanied by an attendant figure holding a bow and seated on the outstretched wing of the eagle (Fig. 9.34).

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[69] Ibid., p. 109. The golden deer is a demon in disguise, employed to lure Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa away from Sītā in order that Rāvaṇa can abduct her.

9.33. A terracotta panel on the temple at Bhītargāon depicting Viṣṇu on the back of his vehicle Garuḍa.

9.34. Gupta period terracotta plaque depicting Viṣṇu on Garuḍa thought to be depicting an episode from the Rāmāyaṇa, Uttarakanda 6-8. Photograph courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum, New York.

Two of Viṣṇu's four arms survive; in his upper left hand he holds a bow, while with his lower left hand he holds a conch to his lips as though issuing a battle cry. All three faces are round with almond-shaped eyes and eyebrows sweeping upwards in a single stroke. All have plump lips and small noses. Both Garuḍa and the attendant sport ear-length curly hair and teardrop-shaped earrings, while Viṣṇu's crown or headdress is badly damaged. This scene is bursting with vitality and dynamism and is thought to be depicting an episode from the *Rāmāyaṇa* (*Uttarakanda* 6-8) in which Viṣṇu engages in battle with armies of *rākṣasas*.[70] Although never acknowledged, this plaque is an exact stylistic match to several other terracotta panels held in a number of museum collections and private collections mostly in North America, and there can be little doubt that these panels all hail from one temple.[71] Interestingly, most of the narrative plaques are inscribed, while one or two, such as the Viṣṇu on Garuḍa panel, may have lost their Brāhmī characters, owing to their fragmented state. The practice of inscribing temple panels is not common during the Gupta period; indeed, the only inscribed plaques from the period that I am familiar with are those from the Jind province in Haryana described above.[72] Curiously, though, in an essay on the subject of illegal excavation in India, Ajai Shankar mentions a site in or near the village of Katingra in District Etah, Uttar Pradesh, where 'moulded bricks and panels have been illegally dug out from twin mounds by the local villagers in connivance with antiquities traffickers and hunters.' Shankar continues:

> The terracotta panels contain inscriptions from the epic Ramayana and are unique in all respects. The remains of these panels, together with the moulded bricks attests to the probable presence at the site of a temple of the Gupta period. Such a temple would be almost unique as only one other site in Haryana is reported to have panels with inscriptions from the Ramayana – namely Nachar

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[70] *From Indian Earth*, p. 154.

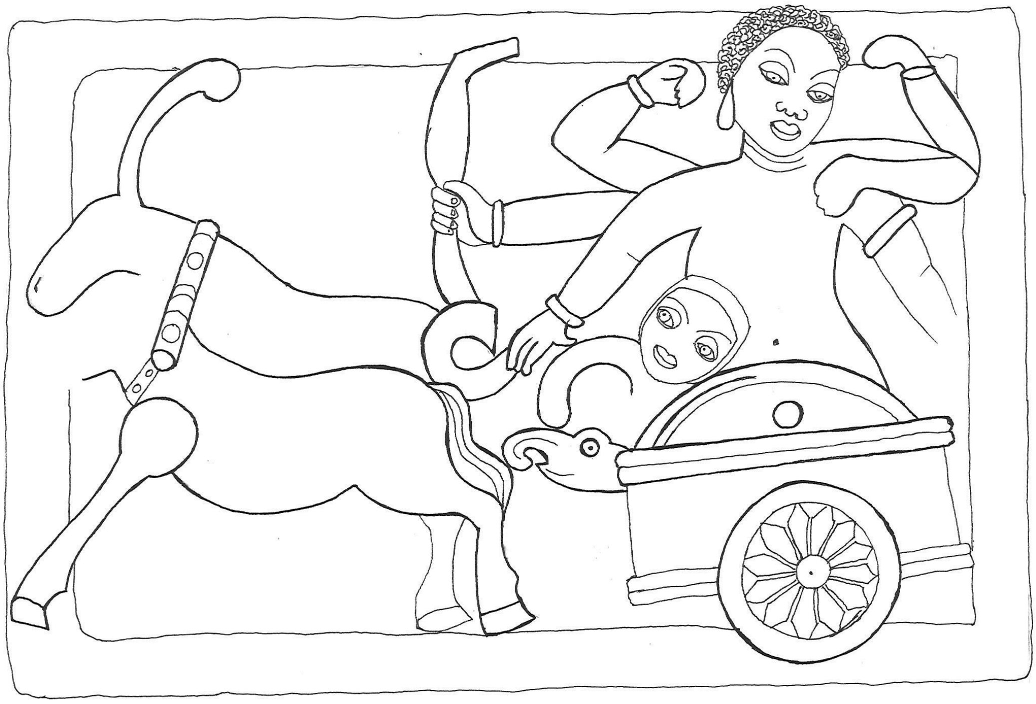
[71] Some of the plaques are published in Poster's catalogue. It is puzzling then, that she has not recognized the striking similarity between the plaques, not only in style but also in scale.

[72] About thirty terracotta plaques, many depicting scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa,* were found by a villager in Palasbari in the Bogra District of Bangladesh. They are inscribed in late Brāhmī characters dating to the post-Gupta period. At least sixteen of the plaques seem to belong to the same sequence and Gouriswar Bhattacharya has done an admirable job of piecing this narrative scheme back together. See Bhattacharya, 'Early Rāmāyaṇa Illustration', pp. 1043-1065.

> Khera in District Jind. The matter was reported to the local police and district administration but no tangible result has been seen.[73]

It is worth tentatively suggesting that the plaques in the Brooklyn Museum Collection, in other museum collections, and dispersed amongst private collectors, might be the missing panels from Katingra.[74]

Now let us turn to the iconography of some of the other panels in the series. A rectangular panel (32.0 x 49.5 x 13.0) in the collections of the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, depicts a six-armed male figure riding a chariot drawn by two galloping horses (Fig. 9.35).[75]



9.35. Drawing illustrating a Gupta period terracotta plaque depicting a six-armed male on a chariot. The multi-limbed character is in the process of releasing an arrow, which no longer exists.

In one of his outstretched arms he holds a bow. There are a couple of curious details here such as a small male figure, possibly the charioteer, who appears to be lying at a peculiar angle against the body of the six-armed figure. Poster suggests that he may

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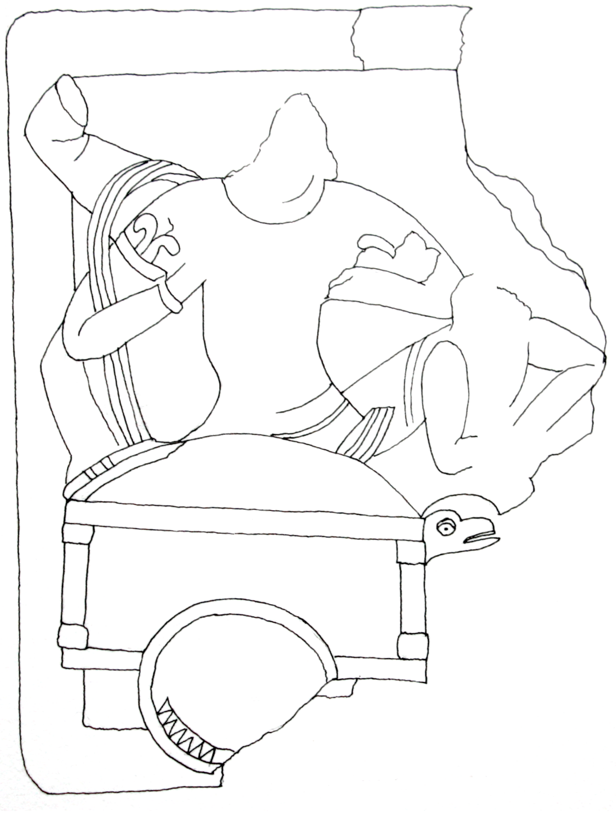
[73] Ajai Shankar, 'The Threat to Cultural Sites in India from Illegal Excavation', in *Trade in Illicit Antiquities: The Destruction of the World's Archaeological Heritage*, ed. by Neil Brodie, Jennifer Doole and Colin Renfrew (McDonald Institute: Cambridge, 2001), pp. 33-37 (p.33).

[74] Katingra is located approximately 100 km southeast of Ahichhatrā, and 122 km east of Mathurā.

[75] A reproduction of the panel is viewable on the Norton Simon Museum webpage. See http://images.nortonsimon.org/viewer/index.php?id=P.2001.11.

be emblematic, but this is unlikely.[76] Indeed, a similar diminutive figure seated at an odd angle is present in a chariot scene depicted on a terracotta panel from Ahichhatrā ACI (Fig. 11.42 and Fig. 11.45). In the latter instance it is very evident that the figure represents a charioteer. At the front of the chariot is a *makara* face somewhat like the figurehead of a ship. In the top right hand corner of the chariot is a Brāhmī inscription which has not been translated but would no doubt tell us who these characters are.[77] The faces of the two males are very similar to those in the previous panel, with the six-armed figure sporting the same short curly hair and drop earrings. Despite not having three heads, there is a tentative possibility that the six-armed character could be a depiction of the demon Triśira portrayed in two panels from Nachar Khera.



9.36. A drawing of a fragmented Gupta period terracotta panel depicting a multi-limbed male figure on a chariot.

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[76] *From Indian Earth*, p. 158.

[77] A seventh century terracotta plaque from Palasbari depicts a two-armed male riding a chariot with a *makara* head at its anterior. This plaque is inscribed with the name Bharata in late-Brāhmī script. According to Bhattacharya, the panel portrays an episode from the *Rāmāyaṇa* in which Bharata, brother of Rāma and also a part incarnation of Viṣṇu, returns to the capital Ayodhyā after hearing of his father Daśaratha's demise. Bharata, however, is two armed so it is unlikely that he is the character depicted in the Brooklyn Museum plaque. See Bhattacharya, 'Early Rāmāyaṇa Illustration', p. 1061.

Interestingly, a very damaged plaque in the Gurukul Museum, Jhajjar, appears to depict an almost identical scene (Fig. 9.36).[78] The plaque illustrates a fragmented multi-limbed male figure seated on a chariot of the exact same type with a *makara* head at the front of the vehicle, and the remnants of a small figure seated at an angle – leaning forward, with his back towards the multi-limbed character. This small figure most probably represents a charioteer. Unfortunately, nothing more of the plaque has survived.

9.37. Drawing illustrating a Gupta period terracotta plaque depicting a six-armed male figure with a kneeling female.

Another rectangular panel (33.0 x 50.8 cm) from the Pritzker Collection depicts a six-armed male figure seated on a peculiar item of furniture – possibly representing a throne, a bed or an airborne chariot (Fig. 9.37). In his upper left hand he holds a flower, its head drooping downwards. He has a short curly coiffure and drop earrings. He appears to be engaged in an animated conversation with a female who sits at his feet holding her palms together in a worshipful gesture. Brāhmī characters have been

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[78] See Virjanand Devakarni, *Prachin Bharat Main Rāmāyaṇ Ke Mandir* (Gurukul Jhajjar: Haryana Pranttiya Puratattva Sangrahalaya, 2007), Plate 4.

etched onto the base of the throne but again these have not been translated. Poster has identified these figures as Maheśvara and his consort Umā,[79] but there are no attributes that explicitly support this. *Mithuna* images of Śiva and Pārvatī are quite common, but usually show the characters sitting more intimately, sometimes sharing a seat or a cushion, and usually touching one another. This image is just as likely to represent, for example, Rāvaṇa, who was not depicted with ten heads during the Gupta period, with the captive Sītā.

A fragment of a panel (30.7 x 39.0 x 13.0 cm) in the collection of Robert H. Ellsworth evidently belongs to the same series (Fig. 9.38).[80] This plaque depicts a *mithuna* couple seated on a large cushion. The female figure leans languidly on her companion, while he rests an elbow on her shoulder in a very casual manner. They both wear ornate armlets and single strands of beads. At the base of the plaque is a Gupta period Brāhmī inscription, which reads *ramana*, meaning "sensual enjoyment".[81]

There can be no doubt that a terracotta lunette held in the Cleveland Museum belongs to the same temple although it does not seem to bear an inscription (Fig. 9.39). It has been attributed to Ahichhatrā but there is no basis for this. Stylistically it is very close to the *mithuna* pair engaged in "sensual enjoyment". Again the male rests his left elbow on the right shoulder of the woman, while she leans in towards him. Both figures also wear a single strand of beads. Moreover, the ear and ear ornament of the female is identical to that of the so-called Umā in the "Umā-Maheśvara" panel (Fig. 9.37). This type of lunette would have been located on the *śikhara* of a temple. The plaque was purchased by the museum in 1971 almost two decades before the other plaques were purchased or gifted.

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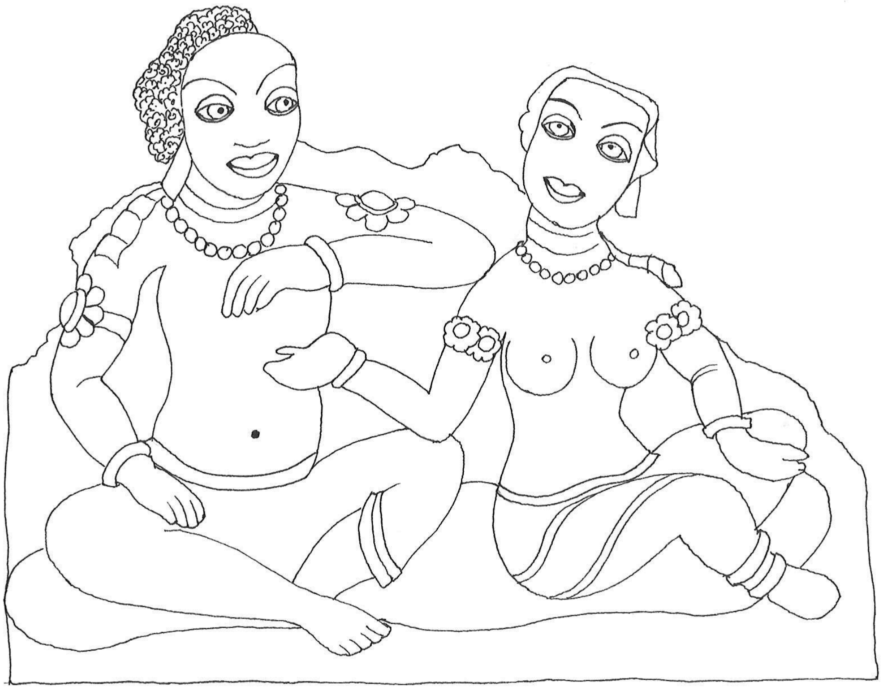
[79] *From Indian Earth*, p. 159.
[80] Ibid., p. 160.
[81] Ibid., p. 160.



9.38. *Drawing illustrating a Gupta period terracotta plaque depicting a mithuna couple.*

9.39. *A terracotta panel, measuring 38.5 x 37 cm, depicting a mithuna couple. Photograph courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art.*

On the basis of style, a further terracotta panel (38.1 x 49.5 x 11.4 cm) in the Brooklyn Museum collection derives from the same temple as the previous few plaques (Fig. 9.40). According to the museum it portrays a royal personage with attendants. A male figure sits on a throne in *lalitāsana*. His right hand is closed and held next to his navel while his left hand rests on his left calf. He wears a crown or headdress suggesting that he has an important status, either as a deity or a king. An ornate armlet survives on his left arm, and he also wears a single strand of beads around his neck. He glances downwards, turning his head away from the other figures in the scene.

9.40. Terracotta Gupta period plaque with a Brāhmī inscription. The panel, which measures 38.1 x 49.5 x 11.4 cm, possibly depicts an episode from the Rāmāyaṇa in which King Daśaratha sends his son Rāma into exile. Photograph courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum, New York.

Behind his seat on either side of his head are two strangely shaped 'objects', possibly lotus buds on stems, both facing inwards towards him. To his left is an undeciphered Brāhmī inscription. A standing female fans the seated figure, while a man kneels and holds his palms together in obeisance. To the rear of the panel is a figure with the recognisable short curly hair and drop earrings. He is probably a priest or attendant figure. Could this scene be depicting the moment when king Daśaratha sends his esteemed son Rāma into exile at the insistence of his scheming wife Kaikeyī?[82] It would explain why the regal figure is not able to make eye contact with the other characters depicted in the plaque. The female fanning the enthroned character could be Kaikeyī or Sītā.

9.41. A terracotta lunette depicting a vidyādhara in the Musée Guimet, Paris.

Based on style, a terracotta lunette in the Musée Guimet depicting a *vidyādhara* bearing an exquisitely rendered garland of flowers derives from the same temple as

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[82] Richard Salomon suggests that the Brāhmī script on this plaque might read *dha* and *se*, which in itself does have any obvious meaning. The likelihood of *dha-se* being a shortening and misspelling of Daśaratha is highly improbable, most especially considering that the sounds are phonetically different (Richard Salomon, Personal Communication, 2014). Regardless though, given the composition, Daśaratha is a convincing candidate for the identity of the royal figure in the plaque and this is strengthened, in my opinion, by his featuring on several terracotta plaques from Palasbari. Another fantastic plaque from Palasbari depicts King Janaka on a throne with Viśvāmitra seated beside him. Rāma kneels on the ground and Sītā stands to his rear. The couple are receiving the blessings of their elders. The composition is not wholly unlike that of the Brooklyn Museum plaque (Fig. 9.37), and there is a possibility that the subject depicted is the same. For a reproduction of the Palasbari plaque see *Chefs-d'oeuvre du Delta du Gange, Collections de Musée du Bangladesh*, ed. by Vincent Lefèvre and Marie-Françoise Boussac (Paris: rmn, 2007), Plate 22.

the panels described above (Fig. 9.41). A further terracotta lunette belonging to the same series was sold at Christie's, New York, in 2003. It depicts the head and upper body of a female (Fig. 9.42).

9.42. A terracotta lunette depicting a woman, 24 cm in height. Photograph courtesy of Christie's, New York.

Kṛṣṇa

Raṅgamahal, near Sūratgarh in Rajasthan, has produced some highly animated plaques which are thought to date from between the early and mid fourth century CE.[83] Hence, it is more accurate to call them Kṣatrapa terracottas, since they pre-date the arrival of the Guptas in this region.[84] These terracottas have been included here because of their proximity in time to the Gupta period. The plaques are rather crude in

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[83] Agrawala, *Gupta Art*, p. 46. Considerable scope remains for further iconographic study of the Raṅgamahal plaques, and moreover, it remains a desideratum for high-resolution images of these important terracotta reliefs to be published.

[84] U. P. Shah, 'Western Indian Sculpture and the so-called Gupta Influence', in *Aspects of Indian Art*, ed. by Pratapaditya Pal (Leiden: Brill, 1972), PP. 44-49 (p. 45).

workmanship but interesting from an iconographic point of view.[85] One plaque portrays a female figure carrying a large water pot on her head. She touches her lip with a finger of her right hand. She wears an unusual skirt with two heavily pleated layers, and a short blouse. Intriguingly, her skirt is overtly Hellenistic in style and similar examples are found on some earlier Gandhāran sculptures depicting female subjects.[86] Returning to the plaque; a veil is draped loosely over the head of the woman. She faces a moustachioed man carrying a large club and wearing a short *dhotī*. The tree to his rear indicates that the scene is unfolding in a forest. According to Jayantika Kala, this is a depiction from Kṛṣṇa's *dānalīlā*. If this is the case, then the plaque pre-dates the earliest surviving textual reference to the *dānalīlā* by over a millennium.[87] The figures are thought to represent Kṛṣṇa in the guise of a toll-collector confronting a maid who expresses her fear at coming across him in the forest.[88]

Another large terracotta panel from Raṅgamahal depicts the myth of *Kṛṣṇa Govardhanadhara*.[89] This spirited scene portrays a mustachioed Kṛṣṇa holding up Mount Govardhana with one hand, in order to protect the cattle from the deluge. The cows are depicted on either side of the deity, and are humorously piled up one on top of the other. Kṛṣṇa is crowned and wears a long garland and a distinctly Kuṣāṇa style necklace. The base of the mountain is portrayed, and is formed of large rounded boulders with trees balancing on top. It is most likely that this same subject is depicted in a refined fragment from a terracotta plaque belonging to the Pritzker collection.[90] The plaque portrays a muscular male figure holding his right arm above his head. A large shawl hangs in folds behind the figure. His face is delicately

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[85] The best quality image of this plaque is reproduced in Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, Plate 127.

[86] H. Goetz has also observed that the costume is Hellenistic in style. Agrawala dismisses this insight, claiming that the outfit is entirely Indian in its conception. R.C. Agrawala, 'Two Interesting Śaiva Terracottas in the Bikaner Museum', *Artibus Asiae*, 19 (1956), pp. 61-65 (p. 63). In a later publication, however, Agrawala also describes this attire as Graeco-Roman, and writes that this type of skirt is known as *yavanaka kanyā colaka* in Jaina literature. R. C. Agrawala, 'Rajasthan's Contribution to Early Brahmanic Iconography', in *Investigating Indian Art: Proceedings of a Symposium on the Development of Early Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, ed. by Marianne Yaldiz and Wibke Lobo (Berlin: SMPK, 1987), p.14.

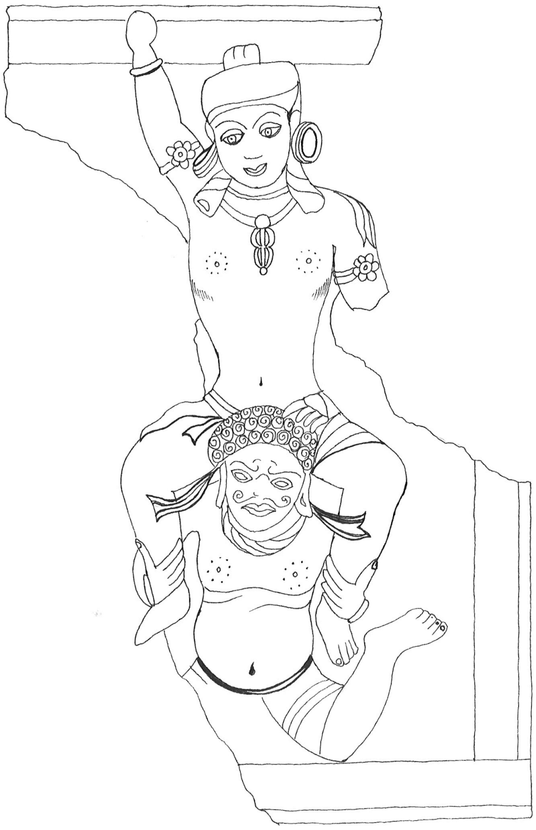
[87] N. R. Bhatt (p.58) cited in Alexis Sanderson, 'Review of N.R. Bhatt, Matangaparamesvaragama (Kriyapada, Yogapada et Caryapada), avec le commentaire de Bhatta Ramakantha', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 48 (1985), pp. 564-568 (p. 568); the first mention of the *dānalīlā* appears in the *Sūrsāgar Śrīkrṣṇakīrtana*, p. 568.

[88] Jayantika Kala, *Epic Scenes in Indian Plastic Art* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1988), p. 89.

[89] This plaque is held in the Bikaner Museum.

[90] This plaque is reproduced in *From Indian Earth*, p. 163.

modelled with charming lotus-shaped eyes framed by arched eyebrows, plump lips, and three folds at the neck. He wears enormous hooped earrings, an interesting pendant around his neck and ornate armlets. Locks of hair rest on his shoulders and his nipples have been encircled by dots presumably representing hairs. He wears a *dhotī* with an asymmetric hem. Nothing else of the plaque survives.



9.43. A drawing of a terracotta plaque in the Pritzker collection depicting Pralamba abducting Balarāma.

A second panel, which I believe originates from the same temple based on the striking similarity in style and ornamentation, also belongs to the Pritzker collection.[91] This plaque depicts Balarāma, the brother of Kṛṣṇa, being abducted by the demon Pralamba (Fig. 9.43). Balarāma is virtually identical in all aspects to the image of Kṛṣṇa in the previous panel. His right arm is raised above his head, ready to strike the demon. He sits on the shoulders of Pralamba who is depicted running. The figure of the demon is squat and pot-bellied, he is frowning and his facial features are

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[91] This plaque is reproduced in *From Indian Earth*, p. 162.

unattractive. His hair is worn in short tight-curls much like the Buddha images of the period. Whether this latter observation is significant or not is open to debate. The myth of Balarāma and Pralamba has also been depicted on a terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā and will be explored later in chapter 11.

9.44. Relief from Deogaṛh depicting Kṛṣṇa upsetting the milk cart. National Museum, New Delhi.

Kṛṣṇa was depicted in several panels along the *jagatī* at Deogaṛh. One such image illustrates the baby Kṛṣṇa astonishing his foster mother Yaśodā by overturning a heavy milk cart that he had been sleeping under, with his foot (Fig. 9.44). Other examples include those mentioned in the previous chapter, when the baby Kṛṣṇa is brought to his foster parents (Fig. 8.10).

At least three plaques at Bhītargāon have been tentatively identified as depicting mythological scenes involving Kṛṣṇa, namely an image of Kṛṣṇa seated beside Balarāma,[92] Kṛṣṇa slaying the elephant Kuvalayāpīdha,[93] and Kṛṣṇa slaying Vṛṣabhāsura.[94] The latter is a relatively small plaque measuring 31 x 25 cm. It depicts a muscular male wrestling with a powerful hump-backed bull standing on his hind

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[92] Zaheer, p. 92.
[93] Ibid., pp. 92-93.
[94] Ibid., p. 88.

legs (Fig. 9.45). Both figures are now headless and armless. The artist has succeeded in capturing the force exerted by both characters and the composition is an effective one.

9.45. A terracotta panel on the south face of the temple at Bhītargāon, depicting Kṛṣṇa slaying Vṛṣabhāsura. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of South Asian Studies.

Śaiva Images

By dividing Gupta period iconography according to religious affiliation, rather than by location or era, it will become strikingly apparent that Śaiva iconography was more often limited to depicting aspects of Śiva, rather than Śaiva narratives. Indeed, Doris Srinivasan points out that early Śaivite myths 'do not receive plastic expression'[95] and that:

> Its absence in much of early Hindu art must be considered purposeful and in response to a different religious orientation. The orientation is decidedly theological: the emphasis is on knowledge of god's nature and the translation of that knowledge into forms fit for worship. A trend, away from the narrative, seems to have continued. A recent study on medieval

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[95] Srinivasan, p. 238.

> narrative sculpture points out that Hindu narrative sculpture was never strong in North India and that this phenomenon must be taken into account when analyzing this genre.[96]

A small number of Śaiva myths were depicted at Ahichhatrā and will be explored in Chapter 11. Nonetheless, but for the odd exception, a perusal of early Śaiva temple sculpture supports Srinivasan's theory, and although the multiple manifestations of Śiva were beginning to find expression in the early temple sculpture of North India and at Elephanta, Aihole, Bādāmi, Paṭṭadakal and Māmallapuram, for instance, it is evident that the emphasis was on portraying the paradoxical facets of the god's nature, rather than representing the unfolding narratives of Śaiva myths. George Michell, describing the sculptural panels at Elephanta, writes:

> The opening to the north … is flanked by images of the Lord of Yogis and Śiva Dancing. This is no accidental pairing, for these are the two most vividly contrasting images of Śiva ever to have been created by Indian artists. Here the energy of the god finds its most powerful and paradoxical expression: it is inward, silent, and still (as the yogi), also outward, noisy, and dynamic (as the dancer). Though represented as opposites the energies of these two images of Śiva are actually identical…[97]

As an aside, the paradoxical and yet all-encompassing nature of Śiva is elegantly encapsulated in a verse written by Kālidāsa, in his *Kumārasaṃbhava* (5.77):

> Possessing nothing and the source of all
> wealth,
> Lord of the world and denizen of the abode of
> the dead,
> dreadful in form he's called "Gentle" Shiva.
> No one knows the Bearer of the Pinaka bow as
> he truly is.[98]

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[96] Ibid., p. 238.

[97] George Michell, 'The Architecture of Elephanta: An Interpretation', *Elephanta, the Cave of Shiva*, ed. by Carmel Berkson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 17-27 (p. 23).

[98] *The Birth of Kumāra by Kali-dasa*, transl. By David Smith (New York: New York University Press and JJC Foundation, 2005, p. 199), cited in Bisschop, 'Śiva', p. 741.

Unlike Viṣṇu, Śiva does not incarnate. However, his numerous names, such as Maheśvara, Rudra, Naṭarāja, Bhairava and Śambhu, are all indicative of his multi-faceted character.[99]

The *Liṅga*

The most significant tangible 'sign'[100] of Śiva is the *liṅga*, which is always located in the sanctum sanctorum of a temple dedicated to the god.[101] Additionally, *liṅgas* might also be situated in a subsidiary position elsewhere on a temple and are sometimes offered as votives. Small *liṅga* shrines, for example, are positioned on the platforms of the terraced Pravareśvara temple at Mansar; and likewise a few simple *liṅga* shrines have been constructed against the base platform on the larger of the pyramidal monuments at Ahichhatrā.

Two predominant types of man-made *liṅga* exist, namely those that are plain and those that are *mukhaliṅga* (with faces).[102] During the Gupta and post-Gupta periods the former type are often composed of a square base, an octagonal shaft and a cylindrical *liṅga*. This is true of the colossal sandstone *liṅga* located at the pinnacle of

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[99] Ibid., p. 741.

[100] Kramrisch, *The Presence of Siva*, p. 167.

[101] There are numerous - and often contradictory - schools of thought on the intrinsic meaning of the Śiva *liṅga*. These various schools of thought have been explored by Srinivasan. Indeed, Kramrisch points out that the *liṅga* is *niṣkala* or by its very nature beyond definition (see Kramrisch, *The Presence*, p. 173). In the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, the earliest discourse on Rudra-Śiva, the meaning of *liṅga* is given as "sign", which can be interpreted as pointing to 'the ulterior existence of something else' (See Srinivasan, p. 231). Following a similar trajectory, the *āgamas* describe the *liṅga* as:

> … the sign of the Spirit, or better, the sign of the Absolute. The earliest carved *liṅga*s can be understood as forms referring to the transcendental god; they declare the presence of that which is non-manifest and non-corporeal. (Srinivasan, p.232).

The *Mahābhārata*, on the other hand, interprets the *liṅga* as being a phallus, although 'Śiva's *liṅga* is not emblematic of his personal sexuality but of his cosmic creative energy.' (Srinivasan, p. 232) Srinivasan proposes a definition for the Śiva *liṅga* according to Brahmanical literature:

> The "Liṅga" is the subtle, unchangeable sign of the otherwise unknowable, transcendental and unseen godhead. This sign is in the form of a phallus to symbolize god's capacity to generate life.' (Srinivasan, p. 233)

It is surprising, considering how widespread *liṅga* worship was in early India, that neither the *Mahābhārata* nor *Rāmāyaṇa* address the subject at any length, although, in one passage of the *Rāmāyaṇa* 7.31.38-40, *liṅga* worship is portrayed as a demonic practice. Rāvaṇa, the king of the *asuras* establishes 'a golden *liṅga* on an altar of sand on the banks of the river Narmadā and worships it with incense and flowers, followed by song and dance.' See Bisschop, 'Śiva', p. 747.

[102] There are several different types of *liṅga*. The simplest being those which are not man-made, so the *svayambhuliṅgas*, meaning self-existent or self-manifest, these are usually embedded phallic-shaped rocks; and the *bāṇa-liṅgas* which are elliptical-shaped smooth stones found in river beds, preferably from the River Narmadā. See Benjamin Walker, *Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1968), p. 594.

the ACI at Ahichhatrā. The base and shaft of the *liṅga* would be buried or at least 'boxed in' with only the *liṅga* exposed for worship. Between one and five faces emerge from a *mukhaliṅga*.[103] Each of Śiva's heads represents a different facet of his personality and this often manifests in the visual representations of the *caturmukhaliṅgas* (four-faced *liṅgas*). Numerous *mukhaliṅgas* of extraordinary craftsmanship were produced during the Gupta period. One of the faces of Śiva 'emerging' from a mature Gupta period sandstone *caturmukhaliṅga* dating to *circa* 450 CE from Nāchnā, sports fangs, a deep frown and a small cobra around his neck. This is a representation of Bhairava, or the fearsome manifestation of Śiva. Another of the faces wears a smile and depicts a benign aspect of the god. Each of the four heads are adorned with intricate crowns, jewellery, *jaṭās* (dreadlocks) and third eyes, the latter symbolic of the all-seeing yogīc nature of Śiva.[104] The jewels and coiffures vary from head to head. One of the most exquisite *ekamukhaliṅgas* (one-faced *liṅgas*) of the later Gupta period belongs to the sanctum of the temple at Bhūmarā (Figs. 9.46a and 9.46b). The face of Śiva is oval, his eyes are almond-shaped and his eyebrows and damaged nose are slender and refined. He has a mysterious "Mona Lisa" smile and a third eye. He wears an opulent headdress and his hair is in a *jaṭāmukuṭa* style adorned with a crescent moon. His ears are exceptionally long, reaching down to his shoulders. His neck has three folds, in a fashion typical of gods in the art of this period. He is bedecked with necklaces, while locks of hair rest gracefully against his chest. Much is said of the spiritual nature of Gupta art, and the serene face of Śiva emerging from the Bhūmarā *liṅga* positively exudes this quality.

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[103] Various myths and ritual practices describe how Śiva came to have multiple heads; in the ritual *Agnicayana* the meaning of Śiva's five heads is given thus:

> In the process of self-manifestation initiated by the god, his five heads emerge first. The five "mukhas" … of god appear before the rest of the body becomes manifest. The heads are fivefold to announce that the manifestation can be considered the connective link between the physical and metaphysical realms. (Srinivasan, p. 13).

A less esoteric myth in the *Ādiparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* (1.203) tells the story of the *asura* brothers Sunda and Upasunda (also known as Nisunda) who could only be slain by one another. The architect of the universe, Viśvakarman, created a dazzling *apsarā* Tilottamā, for the purpose of engendering a deadly rivalry between the brothers. Tilottamā, however, first circumambulated the *devas* whereupon three more heads emanated from Sthāṇu (Śiva) as a result of his desire to watch her as she encircled him. He thus became four-faced or *caturmukha*. See Bisschop, 'Śiva', p. 747.

[103] Srinivasan, p. 174.

[104] Ibid., p. 174.

9.46. (a) and (b) liṅga enshrined in the inner sanctum of the Śiva temple at Bhūmarā. Both photographs courtesy of Adam Hardy.

Terracotta Liṅga

Liṅgas are usually three dimensional and carved from stone; on occasion, however, they are illustrated in stone or terracotta reliefs. A fascinating and highly unusual fragment of a terracotta plaque from Raṅgamahal depicts what appears to be an *ekamukhaliṅga* at the centre of the composition, flanked by two figures.[105] The female figure on the right is fanning the *liṅga* with a flywhisk, while the male figure on the left is described as a *gaṇa*.[106] Above the figures are the swags of a canopy possibly intended to represent a floral garland. The festoon is looped at the centre and hangs directly above the *liṅga*; R. C. Agrawala interprets this as representing a *yonī* (female genitals), but this theory remains open to question.[107] The head of Śiva emerging from the *liṅga* has a vertical third eye and matted hair worn in a topknot. In a later essay,

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[105] I have not come across another terracotta from the Gupta period which depicts a *liṅga.*
[106] Agrawala, 'Two Interesting Śaiva Terracottas', p. 64.
[107] Ibid., p. 64.

Agrawala hypothesizes that this in actuality a *liṅgodbhavamūrti*.[108] With a depiction of a *liṅgodbhavamūrti* scene, though, Brahmā and Viṣṇu would probably be portrayed, whereas in the Raṅgamahal plaque, devotees attend the *liṅga*.

Śiva-Pārvatī

9.47. Stone sculpture depicting Śiva and Pārvatī from Kauśāmbī in Uttar Pradesh. Housed in the Indian Museum in Kolkata. Photograph courtesy of the British Library.

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[108] Agrawala, ‘Rajasthan’s Contribution’, pp. 16-18. The *liṅgodbhava* is a popular Śaiva myth that seeks to explain the origin of the *liṅga*. The myth recounts how a pillar of fire appeared and both Brahmā and Viṣṇu unsuccessfully sought to discover its end. Brahmā took the form of a swan and flew upwards, while Viṣṇu took his boar form and dived into the deep. Ultimately, Śiva emerged from the shaft of fire (the *liṅga*), signalling that he is the greatest of the gods (see Bisschop, ‘Śiva’, p. 750).

Śiva is often depicted in the company of his consort Pārvatī or Umā. A stone sculpture in high relief from Kauśāmbī, Uttar Pradesh, possibly dating to the early Gupta period, depicts the pair standing beside one another, Śiva to the right of Pārvatī (Fig. 9.47). The matted hair of the god is worn in a topknot. He wears a sacred thread across his naked torso, and a single strand of beads. A long shawl is draped over his left shoulder and around his body, hanging over his left wrist. He is ithyphallic but appears to be wearing a long *dhotī*. A water pot is held in his left hand, while his right hand is raised in *abhaya mudrā*. Pārvatī, who is shorter than her husband, wears the most extraordinary headdress, rather reminiscent of the later Elizabethan fashions in its conception. It has an ornate tiara-like band at the centre, with a rosette on either end, out of which spills a large tassel. A damaged Gupta period terracotta head in the Brooklyn Museum wears a headdress with the same type of rosette tassel (Fig. 9.48) and a similar tassel ornament is worn by the Gaṅgā sculpture from Ahichhatrā ACI (Fig. 11.18).

9.48. A Gupta period terracotta head measuring 21.6 x 15.2 cm. Photograph courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

The Kauśāmbī Pārvatī wears elaborate jewelled earrings and many bangles and necklaces. Her torso is naked and around her waist she wears a girdle over which a long piece of folded fabric is draped, preserving her modesty. She wears heavy anklets akin to those worn by women depicted in terracottas from the Śuṅga and Kuṣāṇa periods. Like Śiva she holds her right hand in *abhaya mudrā*, while in her left hand she holds a mirror. Part of an inscription survives on the pedestal beneath the divine couple and records that the sculpture was dedicated in the year 139 under the reign of a local *mahārāja* Śrī Bhīmavarman.[109] While Kramrisch and Williams interpret the year 139 as 387-388 CE,[110] Agrawal believes it to be 217 CE, placing the image firmly in the Kuṣāṇa period.[111]

9.49. Terracotta head of Pārvatī from the terraced monument ACI at Ahichhatrā. National Museum, New Delhi.

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[109] See Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, p. 36.

[110] Stella Kramrisch, 'Die Figurale Plastik der Guptazeit', in *Wiener Beiträge zur Kunst-und kuturgeschichte Asiens,* V (1931), pp. 15-31; and Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, p. 36.

[111] Ashwini Agrawal, 'Synchronizing Art Idiom and Epigraphical Evidence: Śiva-Pārvatī Image Dated 139 From Kauśāmbī', *Journal of History and Social Sciences*, IV (2013) <http://jhss.org/printartical.php?artid=225>

Among the terracotta masterpieces of the Gupta period is an exquisite head depicting Pārvatī from Ahichhatrā ACI (Fig. 9.49). Her face is narrow and oval, and unusually for this period her chin is well defined. Her eyes are deep set and downcast. Her arched eyebrows are neatly incised and follow the line of her eyelid. Her nose is delicate and her shapely lips carry a faint smile. She has a third eye and a crescent moon in her hair. Her coiffure is especially beautiful – at the back of her head she wears a plait arranged into a bun and tied with a garland. Her earrings are disc-shaped and decorated with a *svastika*. This head is one of a male-female pair. The male head is equally striking and has been identified as Śiva, largely based on the accompanying Pārvatī head (Fig. 9.50). His facial features are similar, while his matted hair is worn in a convoluted topknot.

9.50. Terracotta head probably depicting Śiva, hailing from the terraced monument ACI at Ahichhatrā. National Museum, New Delhi.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art houses a terracotta head of Śiva, which closely resembles images of the god represented on some Gupta period *ekamukhaliṅgas* (Fig. 9.51). The god is portrayed with a third eye, matted locks, lotus-shaped eyes and a benevolent smile. The museum proposes that the image might originate from Ahichhatrā, and while the lips and heavily outlined eyes of the deity do recall those of two figures on plaques from ACI (Figs. 11.28 and 11.30), these characteristics are certainly not unique to the city.

9.51. Terracotta head depicting Śiva, 19.7 x 14.3 x 12.1 cm. Photograph courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

In the collections of the Brooklyn Museum is the small Gupta period terracotta head of a smiling woman (Fig. 9.52). Her plaited hair is woven with flowers and she has been depicted with a third eye and a crescent moon on the right side of her head, in the same position as that of the Ahichhatrā Pārvatī. Thus it is quite likely that she represents the same goddess.[112]

9.52. The head of a Saivite figure – probably Pārvatī, 13 x 8.5 x 12.5. Photograph courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

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[112] With her protruding eyes and high-set arched eyebrows she might possibly originate from the same site as the panels discussed in the subsection on 'A Series of Plaques'.

Ascetic Śiva

A finely modelled plaque from Śrāvastī depicts an emaciated four-armed ascetic, probably Śiva, holding rosary beads above his head (Fig. 9.53). The figure has particularly expressive facial features with a furrowed brow, thick eyebrows, downcast eyes, a luxuriant moustache, a topknot and dreadlocks.

9.53. A terracotta plaque from Śrāvastī depicting Śiva in his ascetic guise. Housed in the State Museum, Lucknow.

Bhairava

The popularity of the terrifying deity Bhairava – who later became an important figure in Śākta-Tantrism[113] – really takes off in the post-Gupta period, although

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[113] Joshi, 'Bhairava', in Okada and Zephir, p. 209.

depictions of the god do survive from the Gupta era. That is not to say, however, that Śiva in a terrific manifestation (*aghora* manifestation) had not been depicted prior to this. Indeed, a fierce form of the god had been portrayed on the south face of Maheśvara images or *mukhaliṅgas* for a few centuries before the Gupta period.[114]

9.54. Bhairava image from Sārnāth. Archaeological Museum, Sārnāth.

A sandstone image of a two-armed Bhairava depicted seated in *lalitāsana* dating to the late-Gupta or early post-Gupta period was found at the overwhelmingly Buddhist site of Sārnāth (Fig. 9.54). The god has been portrayed with wide eyes, frowning eyebrows and a third eye. At the centre of his ghoulish crown is a skull flanked by a pair of hands, possibly representing death and liberation from *karma*.[115] In his left hand he holds a trident and in his right hand a *kapāla* begging bowl (a bowl made

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[114] Srinivasan, p. 158ff.
[115] Joshi, *'Bhairava'*, p. 209.

from the crown of a skull). Myths surrounding Bhairava’s exploits, with the most prominent being his crime of Brahminicide, are possibly depicted at Ahichhatrā and will be explored in Chapter 11.

Nīlalohita

9.55. Sculpture from Mansar possibly depicting Nīlalohita. National Museum, New Delhi.

Arguably, the most magnificent Vākāṭaka find from Mansar is a polished red sandstone sculpture depicting a dwarf-like, pot-bellied figure leaning languidly on a bolster cushion (Fig. 9.55). He wears a skull (*kapāla*) and crescent moon (*candrakalā*) in his headdress and holds flowers in three of his four hands. Kaoru Nagata describes how this figure has been variously identified as Jambhala or Kubera; or as a form of

Śiva; or as a *nidhi* or a *gaṇa*.[116] Nagata is in favour of the latter identification, especially since it was not unusual for *gaṇas* to be adorned with some of Śiva's attributes.[117] Bakker, on the other hand, argues that he is a representation of Śiva in his benign form.[118] Most convincing, however, is Bisschop's argument that this is the *gaṇa* Nīlalohita, described in the *Skandapurāṇa* as Rudra born as Brahmā's son.[119] Nīlalohita will be revisited in Chapter 11.

Dancing Śiva

9.56. A dancing Śiva from the Pārvatī temple at Nāchnā Kuṭhārā. National Museum, New Delhi.

Of the two earliest known images of Śiva performing his *tāṇḍava* dance (symbolic of the destruction and renewel of the universe),[120] one hails from the Pārvatī temple at

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[116] Kaoru Nagata, 'The Problems in the Identification of Gaṇa-like Images from Mansar: Is it Śiva or Gaṇa?' (Groningen: Library of the University of Groningen, 2008), p. 3. <http://mansar.eldoc.ub.rug.nl/root4/Mansar/>

[117] Ibid., p. 9.

[118] Bakker, *Mansar*, pp. 117-120. <http://mansar.eldoc.ub.rug.nl/root4/Mansar/>

[119] Peter Bisschop, 'The Skull on Śiva's Head, Preliminary Observations on a Theme in the Śaiva Art of Mansar' (Groningen: Library of the University of Groningen, 2008), pp. 10-13. <http://mansar.eldoc.ub.rug.nl/root4/Mansar/>

[120] See Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva*, pp. 439 -441.

Nāchnā Kuṭhārā,[121] and the other – a fragmented terracotta sculpture sold at Christie's in New York in 2008 – has no known find spot.

The stone sculpture is fragmented and only the head and upper body of Śiva survive (Fig. 9.56). The god is recognisable by his long matted and coiled locks which cascade from above his bejewelled diadem, falling down over his shoulders. His expression is piercing and concentrated, and his three surviving arms are held in a striking dance pose. This form of Śiva – though with a considerably more developed iconography – was to become immensely popular under the Imperial Cōlas in South India.

9.57. A terracotta fragment depicting a dancing Śiva, measuring in its incomplete state, 20.2 cm in height. Photograph courtesy of Christie's, New York.

The terracotta image depicts Śiva with a sweet, joyful and youthful countenance (Fig. 9.57). His hair is worn in a crimped style, typical of the Gupta period. One complete arm and traces of two others survive, thus, like the representation from Nāchnā, he was probably four-armed originally. In contrast to the latter sculpture, though, here Śiva is portrayed with a third-eye and without a crown. It might be

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[121] Agrawala, *Gupta Art*, p. 16.

tentatively suggested that the image originates from Ahichhatrā. This theory is based on its similarity in both style and scale to a terracotta fragment depicting a male figure carrying a knife and riding on a *makara* with the head of a bull (Fig. 9.58). This relief fragment from Ahichhatrā has been held in the reserve collections of the British Museum since 1901.

9.58. A fragment from a terracotta plaque depicting a male figure riding a makara with a bull's head. The fragement, which hails from Ahichhatrā, measures 22.3 x 16 x 5 cm. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

A third fragmentary mica-speckled terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā, housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, is remarkably similar in style to the latter two pieces and on this basis, the possibility exists that it might originate from the same temple, or alternatively, may have been produced by the same *pustakāra(s)* (Fig. 9.59). It depicts two delicately modelled male figures wearing crowns, *dhotīs*, and shawls draped across their chests. At least one of the men sports a luxuriant moustache. Both figures hold their palms together in a gesture of worship and are thus likely to represent noble devotees.

9.59. A fragment of a terracotta plaque depicting two men – probably nobles - worshipping. The plaque has been dated by the Philadelphia Museum of Art to c. 550 CE but it could possibly be earlier than this. The fragment measures 53.3 x 33.7 x 13.3 cm. Photograph courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Kārttikeya

Kārttikeya, also known by several other names including Skanda, Kumāra and Mahāsena, was a prominent deity during the Gupta era. Two of his names were borne by Gupta rulers, chosen perhaps because of his role as commander-in-chief of the armies of the *devas*. Also of significance is the *Kumārasaṃbhava*, a play written by Kālidāsa about the union of Śiva and Pārvatī, which paves the way for the birth of Kumāra or Kārttikeya. The role of the god mutated over time and by the post-Gupta period he had been demoted to a secondary position, overshadowed by his brother Gaṇeśa.[122] Prior to and during the Kuṣāṇa period, Kārttikeya is believed to have held an important role as an appeaser of *grahas* who are maleficent spirits that bewitch pregnant women and children; earlier still he was leader of the *grahas*.[123] Richard Mann persuasively argues how Kārttikeya's fall in popularity came about:

> The material evidence suggests that his cult was widespread and 'popular' when he was primarily recognized as a Graha because his cult dealt with concerns that cut across all sections of society: the health of children and mothers. The shift to a martial and Śaivite deity removes him from such broad religious and social contexts and places him in more elite circles of royal propaganda and Brahminical concerns for orthodoxy.[124]

Kārttikeya is a six-headed, twelve-armed deity,[125] although he is rarely depicted as such in the Gupta period;[126] an exception is the unique early Gupta period relief carving belonging to a gateway lintel from Pawāyā depicting the birth of Kārttikeya with the six Kṛttikās, the wrongly disgraced wives of the *saptarṣis* (seven seers) (Fig. 10.28).[127] This image will be explored in the following chapter. The Kṛttikā are also a

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[122] Richard D. Mann, *The Rise of Mahāsena, The Transformation of Skanda-Kārttikeya in North India from the Kuṣāṇa to Gupta Empires* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), pp. 1-3.

[123] Ibid., p. 1. Mann argues that Kārttikeya was originally perceived as the leader of the *Grahas*, and thus had a dual role as an ever-present threat to pregnant women and children, and as a protector of his devotees.

[124] Ibid., p. 3.

[125] Srinivasan, p. 303.

[126] Srinivasan notes that Kārttikeya/ Skanda is only depicted with one head and two arms in Kuṣāṇa art. See Srinivasan, p. 334.

[127] The 'birth of Kārttikeya' image has survived in two pieces; for a reproduction of the other half of the image, which is still attached to the lintel, see Okada and Zephir, p. 262.

constellation of six stars – the Pleiades, after which the month of Kārttika is named.[128] Willis postulates that Kārttika is:

> Particularly suited to military exploits because it comes at the end of the rainy season and is the time when armies can begin to move easily across the Indian countryside. The month is accordingly connected with Skanda, the god of war.[129]

As mentioned in Chapter 2, to the right of the exterior of Cave 4 at Udayagiri is a recess containing a Mātṛkā (mother goddess) shrine with several severely eroded figures seated in a row. Willis identifies them as the Kṛttikās and also suggests that a damaged ithyphallic figure with a banner situated beside the mothers is a depiction of Kārttikeya.[130] Enshrined in Cave 4 is an *ekamukhaliṅga*. A niche outside of Cave 6 at Udayagiri also contains six worn female figures seated in a row and flanked by two males. Willis again identifies these as representations of the Kṛttikās, joined by Kārttikeya and Vīrabhadra, the latter being a fierce manifestation of Śiva.[131] Mann describes how:

> The Gupta era material evidence from the west of India indicates the spread of a strong devotional cult towards the Mātṛs or Mātṛkās as they became known. The form of Kārttikeya standing holding a cock becomes linked to this Mātṛ/Mātṛkā devotional tradition.[132]

It may seem peculiar that the overtly Vaiṣṇava Gupta rulers would take the name of a deity belonging to the Śaiva pantheon. Moreover, what was Kārttikeya doing on the predominantly Vaiṣṇava Pawāyā lintel? The answer may lie in the complex and numerous parentage myths of Kārttikeya, but also with the respectful attitude of the Gupta rulers towards Śaivism. It is not until the post-Gupta period that Kārttikeya is

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[128] Willis, *The Archaeology*, p. 174.

[129] Ibid., p. 174.

[130] Ibid., p. 177. Willis suggests that this shrine was probably used for a ritual practice outlined in the *Atharvaveda*.

[131] Willis, *The Archaeology*, p. 142. It is not clear to me how it was possible to identify the male figures given their poor condition.

[132] Mann, p. 206.

invariably worshipped as the son of Śiva. Prior to this, he enjoyed an independent, or at least partially independent cultic status.[133]

A gold coin minted during the reign of Kumāragupta I, depicts on the obverse, the muscular ruler standing beside a peacock, the vehicle of Kārttikeya (Fig. 9.60). This image is clearly intended to liken the ruler to the god. The obverse of the coin illustrates Kārttikeya seated on his vehicle, holding a spear in his left hand and making an offering to an altar with his right hand. The feathers of the peacock are fanned.

9.60. A gold coin depicting on the obverse, Kumāragupta I facing a peacock; and on the reverse, Kārttikeya seated on a peacock. The legend is incomplete but is thought to read, 'victorious is mahendrākumāra [Kumāragupta I], by his own merits'. The coin was found by Alexander Cunningham. Photograph courtesy of the British Museum.

A *candraśālā* fragment from Bhūmarā frames a stiff depiction of Kārttikeya seated in *lalitāsana* on his vehicle, a peacock, who wears a bell around his neck (Fig. 9.61).[134] The wings of the peacock are outstretched following the circular form of the niche, while tail feathers fan out behind the deity. Kārttikeya carries his attribute, a tall spear in his left hand; his right hand has broken away. He wears a necklace with a medallion pendant typical in Gupta period sculpture, especially with images of Kṛṣṇa.

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[133] Sukumari Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony: A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology from the Vedas to the Purāṇas* (Delhi: Molital Banarsidass, 1988), p. 182.
[134] This fragment is on display at the State Museum, Allahabad.

Kārttikeya is crowned and his hair is matted with a loose lock resting on each shoulder.

9.61. A candraśālā fragment from Bhūmarā depicting Kārttikeya seated on his peacock vehicle. State Museum, Allahabad.

A badly damaged terracotta image of the god found in the Yamunā River and housed at the Government Museum, Mathurā, is similar in iconography (Fig. 9.62).[135] Though most of the peacock is lost, the claw and wing on the right side of the plaque survives. Kārttikeya appears to be bald but it is most probable that his hair has detached from the plaque and indeed a few strands can still be seen on the left side of his head. His hair may have been worn in a *triśikhin* arrangement (three separate tufts typical of the deity). Kārttikeya carries the remnants of a spear in his left hand and wears a pendant with a medallion, this time flanked by tiger claws, symbolic of

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[135] V. S. Agrawala, *Handbook of the Sculptures in the Curzon Museum of Archaeology Muttra* (Allahabad, 1939), p. 51. Mann discusses how terracotta images of the deity may have often been temporary and used in family or non-elite contexts. He gives the example of a woman having images of Ṣaṣṭhī and Kārttikeya in the vicinity when giving birth. In a situation such as this Kārttikeya would have been worshipped as a *Graha* rather than as a warrior, suggesting that this aspect of the god persisted in non-elite settings. See Mann, pp. 216-217.

youth.[136] Agrawala records one fragmented terracotta image of Kārttikeya found during the 1940-44 excavations at Ahichhatrā. Only a section of the god's legs and a fragment of a peacock wearing a bell have survived. Unlike the examples discussed above, here the peacock stands next to Kārttikeya.[137]

9.62. A fragmented terracotta plaque apparently found in the River Yamunā, depicting Kārttikeya. Government Museum, Mathurā.[138]

A small terracotta image of Gupta period Kārttikeya from Ahichhatrā is in the Allahabad State Museum (Fig. 9.63). The god is recognisable by his *triśikhin*

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[136] Mann, p. 205.

[137] See Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 27, Plate XII.

[138] The style of this piece has much in common with some of the terracottas from Ahichhatrā, especially those housed in the State Museum, Allahabad.

hairstyle, although, the central 'tuft' is instead worn in a topknot. The head if a peacock also survives next to the right thigh of the deity.

9.63. Gupta period terracotta image of Kārttikeya from Ahichhatrā, measuring 15 x 10 cm. State Museum, Allahabad.

Durgā

Although she later became one of the principle *devīs* of the Śaiva pantheon, prior to and during the Gupta period the beautiful but fierce Durgā is thought to have been a relatively independent goddess.[139] She is often depicted in the act of slaying the buffalo demon Mahiṣā and in this guise she is known as Mahiṣāsuramardinī. She is one of the central protagonists of the *Devīmāhātmyam*, a Sanskrit text composed

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[139] David Kinsley, 'The Portrait of the Goddess in the *Devī-māhātmya*', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 46 (1978), pp. 489-506 (p. 494).

sometime around the second half of the eighth century CE.[140] Rock carvings at Udayagiri include reliefs of a twelve-armed Mahiṣāsuramardinī.

9.64. Rock carving on the wall of Cave 6 at Udayagiri depicting Durgā Mahiṣāsuramardinī.

One such image depicts her wielding all manner of vicious looking weapons such as a sword, barbed dart, and spear in her right hands, while in her left hands she holds a bow and a shield (Fig. 9.64). Above her head she holds an ornate bejewelled garland. With one foot on the buffalo demon's head, and a left hand holding his hind legs, she drives a trident into him. Her facial features are worn; she has a voluptuous figure and wears a beaded girdle around her waist from the centre of which hangs a length of

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[140] See Yuko Yokochi, *Rise of the Warrior Goddess in Ancient India*, *A Study of the Myth Cycle of Kauśikī – Vindhyavāsinī in the Skandapurāṇa* (unpublished PhD thesis, Groningen: 2004), p. 8.

pleated fabric. According to Agrawala, images of Mahiṣāsuramardinī began to emerge at Ahichhatrā during the Gupta period and were at their most popular during the post-Gupta period.[141]

Still *in situ* on the Bhītargāon temple is a damaged terracotta plaque apparently depicting a four-armed Durgā slaying the *asuras* Śumbha and Niśumbha (Fig. 9.65).[142] The heads of the three figures are lost, as are the breasts and two arms of the goddess. What remains, however, is an energetic composition depicting the *devī* standing at the centre with a naked torso and a long flowing skirt. She is flanked by the *asuras* who are on their knees, bodies arched backwards, and dressed in belted tunics representing animal skins. With her two upper hands the goddess drives spears into the *asuras*.

9.65. Terracotta panel on the north face of the temple at Bhītargāon depicting Durgā slaying Śumbha and Niśumbha.

Lastly, a vivid terracotta image of the goddess dating to *circa* the fourth-century CE was found at Sarsabaz in District Bogra, Bangladesh. The full-figured, bare-breasted, four-armed deity is depicted crushing the buffalo demon beneath her foot. Mahiṣā's

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[141] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 29.

[142] In the *Devīmāhātmyam* (XI. 7-23) the goddess is praised as Nārāyanī following the slaying of the two demons, thus associating her with Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa. See Kinsley, p. 491.

head is thrown backwards in a realistic fashion and Durga grasps his muzzle with her lower left hand. In her two upper hands she wields weapons.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted how important the Gupta period is in terms of religious iconography, with many myths seeing their birth in visual form during this era. Moreover, it is striking just how well-developed and even formulaic Hindu iconography became during the course of the Gupta period, although nuances are in evidence. On this premise, it has been necessary to call into question the identity of characters or themes in certain reliefs, which have arguably been wrongly interpreted to date. As an example, two of the images previously thought to represent Nara and Nārāyaṇa do not follow the iconographic formulae observable in the panels from Deogaṛh and Bhītargāon – both of which assuredly represent the sages. The plaque in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, for example, does not represent any of the attributes by which we might confidently identify these ascetics as Nara and Nārāyaṇa. On this basis we might propose that they depict a different pair of sages.

It is noticeable how wide-ranging Vaiṣṇava imagery is in comparison to Śaiva iconography during this period, with stories from the *Rāmāyaṇa* being particularly popular. In this respect, the panels from ACI at Ahichhatrā, which will be explored in Chapter 11, can be considered unusual because of the diverse range of the largely Śaiva iconography, but also in light of the narrative nature of some of the plaques.

This chapter has assembled a sizeable group of lively terracotta plaques, many of them now housed in museum collections in the United States of America and in Europe, which in all probability originated from the same temple (possibly in Katingra), although this has never been acknowledged. In addition, in Chapters 8 and 9, the original locations of a small number of panels for which the find spots were previously not known have been identified, either based on old photographs and archaeology reports, or – more tentatively – on style and scale.

Lastly, in Chapters 8 and 9 we have examined various aspects of Gupta sculpture, including iconography, popular themes, the birth of the Gupta style and its development. Aside from these discussions being illuminating and, in some instances, contributing to knowledge, the goal of both of these chapters was to provide a sound context for the exploration of terracottas and stone sculptures at Pawāyā and Ahichhatrā in Chapters 10 and 11.

Chapter 10: Iconography at Pawāyā

Terracotta Panels

Many fragments from broken terracotta panels where found during excavation of the Pawāyā monument, most of them beautifully modelled, characterful and delicate – tantalizingly suggestive of how splendid this temple must have been. Although not a single complete plaque has survived, some themes or characters are recognisable. In her chapter on *The Forgotten Terracottas of Padmavati*, Rekha Morris reaches the conclusion that many of the surviving figurative fragments hail from scenes of a secular nature, for example depicting:

> … dandies and damsels of a prosperous and sophisticated urban culture, or ordinary mortals caught during their moments of grief or gusto for life, and which are vivacious and energetic images of the mundane life of a city lost in time.[1]

The male figures who appear to be engaged in fights or battles are, instead, described by Morris as athletes,[2] while one of the female figures is described as being 'out for a stroll.'[3] In actuality, as one might expect, most of these figurative fragments seem to belong to scenes of a religious and epic nature.

A wonderful terracotta relief of Brahmā seated on a lotus, with three of his four heads depicted, is housed at the State Museum of Madhya Pradesh in Bhopal (Fig. 10.1). This figure is located at the top of a broken plaque and probably originally sprang from the navel of a sleeping Viṣṇu – a myth later told in the *Devīmāhātmyam*, in which the *asuras*, Madhu and Kaiṭabha, arose out of the dirt in Viṣṇu's ears (or, according to some versions within the *Mahābhārata*, out of two drops of water) while he was sleeping and tried to slay Brahmā, thereby jeopardizing the whole of creation (MBh 12.348). Fortunately, the god awoke at the opportune moment and destroyed the *asuras*. This myth is depicted in a lively, well-preserved Gupta period plaque from

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[1] Rekha Morris, 'The Forgotten Terracottas of Padmavati', in *Indian Terracotta Sculpture: The Early Period*, ed. by Pradapaditya Pal (Mumbai: Marg, 2002), pp. 86-97 (p. 97).

[2] Ibid., p.93.

[3] Ibid., p.95.

Bhītargāon, housed at the Indian Museum, Kolkata. The sequel, Madhusūdana (Viṣṇu) slaying, or in this case asphyxiating, Madhu and Kaiṭabha, is also depicted at Bhītargāon. In both plaques, the *asuras* wear what I believe to be leopard skin tunics. Interestingly, there are a number of fragments from Pawāyā depicting male figures clothed in a similar ensemble, all of which could represent Madhu or Kaiṭabha at different stages of the myth, or alternatively an assortment of *asuras*.[4] One fragment in particular wields a club and thus almost certainly depicts either Madhu or Kaiṭabha (Fig. 10.2a). A terracotta fragment depicting the head of a deity wearing an ornate crown is on display in the State Museum, Bhopal, and probably represents Viṣṇu (Fig. 10.2b).

10.1. Terracotta relief fragment from Pawāyā depicting Brahmā. State Museum, Bhopal.

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[4] At Bhītargāon the *asuras* Śumbha and Niśumbha are also represented wearing animal skin tunics.

10.2. (a) Terracotta relief fragment from Pawāyā possibly depicting Madhu or Kaiṭabha. Gujari Mahal Museum, Gwalior. (b) Terracotta fragment from Pawāyā depicting the head of a deity, possibly Viṣṇu. State Museum, Bhopal.

10.3. Terracotta relief fragment from Pawāyā depicting the goddess Durgā seated on a lion.[5]

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[5] Garde, *Annual Administration Report*, *Year 1940-41*, Plate VI.

The lower portion of a female figure with a sinuous form seated on a lion represents the goddess Durgā (Fig. 10.3). The delightful manner in which the front paws of the lion are crossed over can also be seen on a fifth century terracotta roundel depicting Durgā, from Śrāvastī, housed at the State Museum, Lucknow. A fragment depicting a particularly nasty looking buffalo might represent the demon Mahiṣāsura, perhaps in the process of being slain by Durgā – a popular theme in the Gupta period (Fig. 10.4).

10.4. Terracotta relief fragment from Pawāyā possibly depicting the demon Mahiṣāsura. Gujari Mahal Museum, Gwalior.

Stories from the *Rāmāyaṇa* were potentially among the themes depicted on the temple at Pawāyā. At least three monkey figures from broken plaques were found during the excavations. There is also a male figure riding a horse while carrying a bow slung across his chest (Fig. 10.5b); a second rather more damaged fragment of a male horse rider; a horse without a rider (Fig. 10.5a); and other male figures with bows and arrows, one or more of whom could represent Rāma and/or Lakṣmaṇa (Fig. 10.6a). Moreover, the fragment of an elegant woman might be a depiction of Sītā, or alternatively, a goddess such as Pārvatī (Fig. 10.6b).

10.5. (a) Terracotta horse without rider, from Pawāyā; (b) terracotta horse with rider, from Pawāyā. State Museum, Bhopal.

A terracotta relief fragment depicting the head of a ferocious looking male with a frowning brow, wide eyes and a gaping mouth is remarkably like a representation of the demon Pralamba in a relief from Uttar Pradesh described in Chapter 9 (Fig. 10.7).[6] Thus, this head may have been part of a plaque depicting Pralamba abducting Balarāma, a suitable theme for a temple dedicated to Viṣṇu.

In addition, there are several marvellously expressive heads portraying anguish, grief, and anger among other emotions. One of the heads has fangs (Fig. 10.8). These surely represent *rākṣasas*, as a passage in the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* illustrates:[7] 'Daityas and Dānavas should have frightening mouths, frowning faces, round eyes and [one] should represent them with gaudy garments though without crown'.[8] Incidentally, as explored in the Chapter 9, Bakker has suggested, albeit tentatively, that episodes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* were among the themes depicted on the Vākāṭaka period terraced Pravareśvara temple at Mansar in Maharashtra.[9] Two red sandstone sculptural fragments found at the site probably depict *rākṣasas* (possibly Vibhīṣaṇa and Virādha), and loosely echo the fragments from Pawāyā.

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[6] *From Indian Earth*, p. 16.
[7] The *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* is an encyclopaedic manual, dealing with architecture and painting alongside numerous other wide-ranging subjects.
[8] *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, III. 84. 1-15, trans. by Stella Kramrisch (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1928), pp. 108-109.
[9] Bakker, *Mansar*, p. 108.

10.6. Terracotta relief fragments from Pawāyā in the State Museum, Bhopal: (a) Man with an ascetic hairstyle wearing a channavīra, quivers of arrows and carrying a bow. This is probably a depiction of Rāma or Lakṣmaṇa; (b) a woman with a nude torso, an armlet, necklaces and a shawl. Her hairstyle – the same in style as the male archer, suggests that she may be a representation of Rāma's wife, Sītā.

10.7. Terracotta head from Pawāyā either representing an asura – perhaps Pralamba – or less possibly, Bhairava with a cobra around his neck.[10]

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[10] Garde, *Annual Administration Report*, *Year 1933-34,* Plate X.

10.8. Terracotta heads from Pawāyā possibly depicting Daityas and Dānavas.[11]

Notably, there are several terracotta relief heads and busts surviving, all with similar facial features: doe-like eyes, arched, sweeping eyebrows incised with a single line, small but plump lips, wide noses and round faces. Most of them wear large hooped earrings. Some have tightly curled hair, while others have hair incised with tiny squares (Figs. 10.9, 10.10 and 10.11). The better-preserved fragments wear a topknot. Owing to their graceful features, they could all be identified as female, as indeed both Morris and the State Museum in Bhopal describe them.[12] Yet, examples that also depict the chest of these figures indicate that at least some are male figures (Fig. 10.12).

These busts were positioned at the centre of lunettes or small rectangular plaques most of which have now crumbled away. Some could, conceivably, have been part of an arrangement similar to that at Bhītargāon where the magnificent *śikhara* (tower) has multiple tiers of arch hood mouldings of different sizes (small, medium, large) and shapes (square, semi-circular and rectangular), each of which once contained a lively figurative scene, head or bust. In his 1924-25 report, Garde writes:

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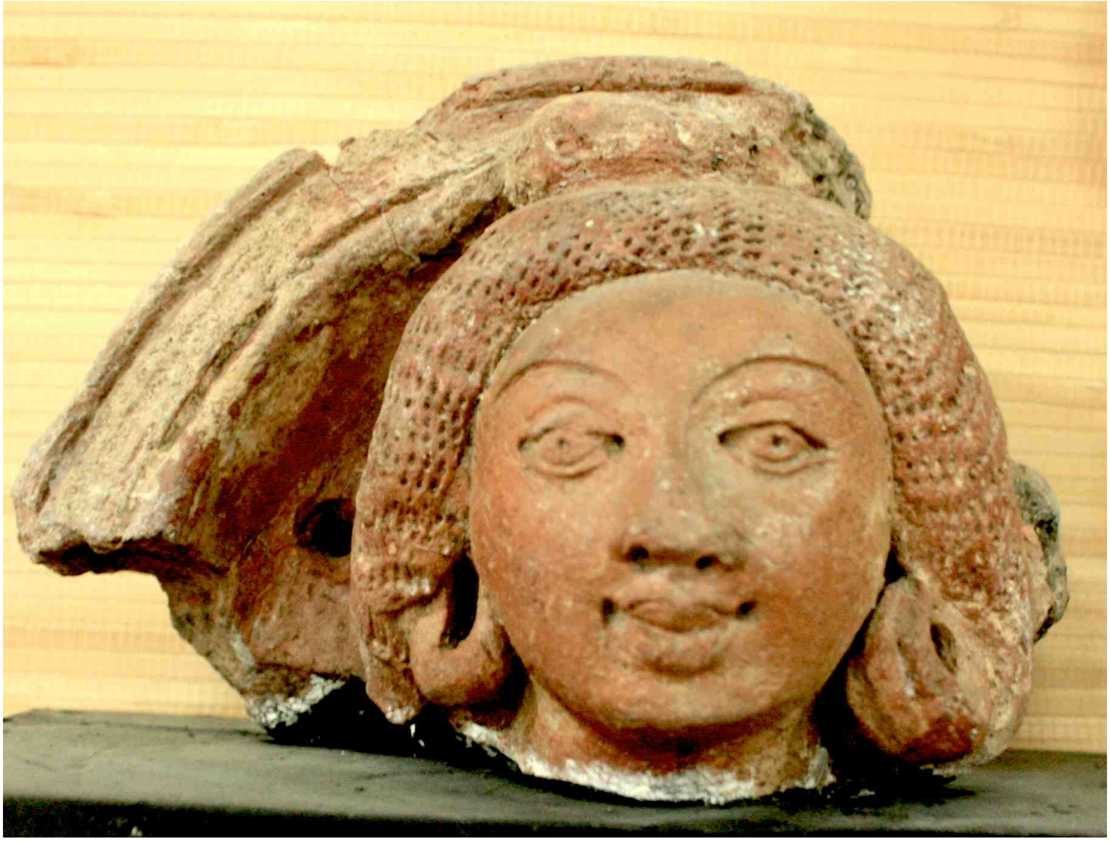
[11] Garde, *Annual Administration Report*, *Year 1940-41*, Plate V.
[12] Morris, p. 89.

> It appears that the exterior of the building was further decorated with *terra cotta* figures and carvings, a number of which have been found in the diggings. None of these however was found *in situ*.[13]



10.9. Fragment of a lunette from Pawāyā depicting a head. State Museum, Bhopal.

Evidently, the walls of the lower two platforms did not house terracotta plaques; the upper platform on the other hand was unearthed in so poor a condition that it is not possible to establish whether plaques could have been located between the pilasters. It is worth mentioning, however, that at Ahichhatrā the terracotta panels were located along the walls of the uppermost terrace.[14] There is also the possibility that the plaques from Pawāyā were situated on the temple itself. The terracotta lunettes depicting busts might well have been positioned beneath the *candraśālā* mouldings on both the second and third terraces – an arrangement found at Bhītargāon, Ajaṇṭā, on architectural fragments from Mathurā and elsewhere.

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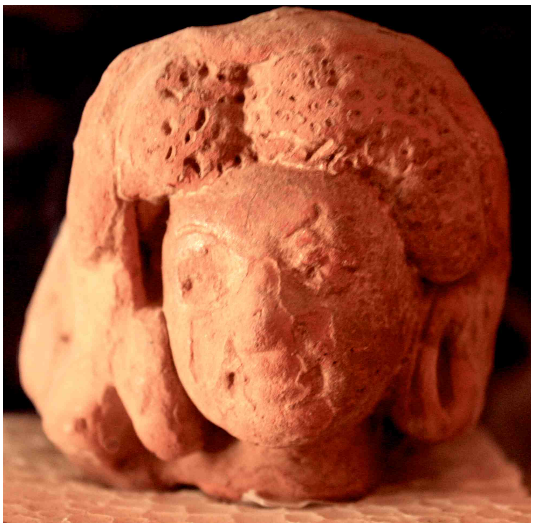
[13] Garde, *Annual Report Gwalior State*, p. 10.
[14] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 63.



10.10. Fragment of a head from a terracotta plaque from Pawāyā. Gujari Mahal Museum, Gwalior.

11.11. A terracotta head from Pawāyā measuring 9.5 x 7.6 cm. Photograph courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.[15]

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[15] This terracotta head is housed in the Brooklyn Museum, however, the museum has not recorded its original location. The head is photographed in M. B. Garde, *Annual Report of the Archaeological*

10.12. A terracotta lunette from Pawāyā depicting a male bust. The fragmented plaque measures 24.8 x 25.4 x 8.3 cm. Photograph courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.[16]

Stone Pieces

Several fragments belonging to stone sculptures were found at Pawāyā, along with a pillar capital, a palm-leaf pillar, a stone lintel belonging to a gateway, and the stone

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Department Gwalior State for Year 1939-40, Vikram Samvat 1996 (Gwalior: n. pub., 1942), Plate VIa, but part of the original plaque was still affixed to the head at this point in time.

[16] The Philadelphia Museum of Art has not acknowledged that this image (acquired by Stella Kramrisch) hails from Pawāyā. It is, however, photographed in Garde, *Annual Administration Report*, *Year 1933-34,* Plate XI.

makara waterspout found *in situ* and discussed earlier. All of this suggests that the brick temple contained many stone elements, no doubt heightening its splendour. Most of these date to the early Gupta period. A few of the most significant stone pieces will be discussed below.

Yakṣa Sculptures

10.13. (a) Mutilated three-headed Yakṣa sculpture from Pawāyā. Photography courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies. (b) Fragments depicting a pot-bellied figure on a pedestal. Photograph courtesy of Michael Willis.

These defaced Yakṣa sculptures most probably date to the Gupta period. Garde describes one of them as being a four-sided bracket capital found half way up the mound enveloping the brick temple during his survey of Pawāyā in 1915. He reports the sculpture as having one plain side, and a dwarf carved on each of the remaining sides with arms upraised.[17] One of the sculptures is lying in the shed at the archaeological site (Fig. 10.13a), while two fragments belonging to a pot-bellied figure seated on a pedestal sit inside the modern entrance to the monument (Fig. 10.13b). The knotted fabric worn around the abdomen of this figure is also evident in one of the multi-headed Yakṣa sculptures.

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[17] Garde, 'The Site of Padmavati', p. 107.

Pillar Capital

A highly unusual sculpture from Pawāyā, now housed at the Gujari Mahal Museum, Gwalior, depicts two male figures standing back to back, with a large *cakra* positioned between their heads (Figs. 10.14a and 10.14b).

10.14. Double-sided stone pillar capital from Pawāyā possibly representing conjoined Cakrapuruṣas: (a) face one; (b) face two. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

Despite being conjoined, the figures have strikingly different demeanours. The figure illustrated in Fig. 10.14a is holding his right hand up in *abhayamudra.* His left hand, which appears to be clasping something, rests against his upper thigh. His posture is static and upright, and he looks ahead with a glazed expression. He wears a crown onto which is etched a many-petalled lotus. Above his typically wide open, lotus-shaped eyes sit a pair of sharply arched eyebrows. His nose is straight and he has small but plump lips. His body lacks the fluidity and definition of the mature Gupta style and can thus be assigned an early date. The conjoined figure is more animated. He tilts his head to the side and looks away. Any attributes he might have been holding have been lost. This sculpture would have been positioned at the pinnacle of a monumental stone pillar.

There are two comparable sculptures; the first is the capital crowning the Budhagupta column at Eraṇ dated to 485 CE (Fig. 10.15).[18]

10.15. The Budhagupta column at Eraṇ. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

Here we also find addorsed stone figures with a spoked-*cakra* situated between their heads. The column is described in an inscription as being the flagstaff of the god

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[18] Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, p. 11.

Janārdana (Viṣṇu),[19] while the two figures crowning the capital both represent his winged vehicle Garuḍa, depicted in anthropomorphic form, each holding a cobra. The second comparable sculpture is housed at the Patna Museum and originates from Mahrawan in Bihar.[20] It has been dated to the sixth century. The double-faced sculpture depicts a large spoked-*cakra*, the wheel of which is decorated with an elaborate floral motif. At the centre, on each side of the *cakra* is a dancing male figure poised on a lotus. The dance *mudras* are graceful and well executed. The faces of both figures are worn, but it is possible to make out their large lotus petal-shaped eyes and serene expressions. Both figures have curled hair, and wear short *dhotīs* and scarves, the latter accentuating their movement. The dancers are adorned with armlets, bracelets, anklets and necklaces from which dangle a variety of pendants. These include tiger claws, which have led the Patna Museum to interpret the figures as each representing Kārttikeya.[21] M. C. Joshi disputes this interpretation on the grounds that the wheel is an attribute of Viṣṇu. Moreover, he argues that Kārttikeya has never been associated with dance. Instead he believes that this may be depicting Cakrapuruṣa, the personification of Viṣṇu's discus.[22] Rather delightfully, the dancing figures are probably indicating that the wheel is in motion.

Returning to the Pawāyā capital, Harle identifies the figure with an erect posture as a solar deity owing to the spoked-*cakra* – either Sūrya or Viṣṇu. Given its context, the latter deity is the more likely of the two candidates. If it does represent Viṣṇu, though, it is odd that he has only been depicted with two arms in contrast to other images of the god at Pawāyā. P. K. Agrawala identifies 'face two' as a representation of Viṣṇu in his role as *cakravartin*.[23] In the *Vayūpurāṇa* it is announced that '*chakravartins* are born in each age as the essence of Viṣṇu. They have lived in the ages past and will come again in the future'.[24] Frederick Asher neatly summarises the meaning of *cakravartin* as being 'the age-old ideal king, whose very name means wheel-turner and who, in concept, followed the path of an ever-turning wheel, extending his

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[19] Chand Jain, p. 244.
[20] For a reproduction of this capital, see M. C. Joshi, 'Dancing figure against a wheel (*cakra*)', in Okada and Zéphir, pp. 301-303.
[21] Ibid., p. 301.
[22] Ibid., p. 301.
[23] Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, p. 40.
[24] Goyal, p. 66.

righteous rule to the four quarters.'[25] The Gupta rulers appear to have modelled themselves upon this idea, and it is not at all surprising that they would erect such a pillar in a recently conquered territory. Tempting as this hypothesis is, however, there is little to support the argument that this sculpture represents a *cakravartin*, or a pair of *cakravartins*. As with Joshi's interpretation for the Bihar sculpture, there is a tentative possibility that the Pawāyā figures are a magnificent representation of Cakrapuruṣa, as previously mentioned, the personification of Viṣṇu's destructive weapon, the Sudarśana-*cakra*.[26] Most surviving Cakrapuruṣa sculptures are small, however, and generally play a secondary role in a sculptural composition centering on Viṣṇu. It should be noted here that a diminutive, weathered and badly damaged sculpture, probably depicting a Cakrapuruṣa, survives from Pawāyā. Harle places the Pawāyā sculpture in the fourth century CE,[27] which, if accurate, indicates that it may have been erected during Samudragupta's reign, or shortly afterwards.

Viṣṇu

With its forward facing, upright posture, this stone sculpture of a standing four-armed Viṣṇu measuring in its current state 97 cm in height, might have originally been situated in the *garbhagṛha* (inner sanctum) of the brick temple (Fig. 10.16). The face of the sculpture looks as though it has been severed, most probably during the sixteenth century ransack of Pawāyā. In his lower left hand Viṣṇu holds a conch, and in his upper left hand, a discus, or *cakra*. His lower right hand is held in *abhaya mudra*. The object in his upper right hand is not so easily recognisable, but could be a mace. The carving, though delicate, is rudimentary when compared with some spectacular examples of Viṣṇu images from the Gupta period, especially those hailing from the Mathurā region. The jewellery on the Pawāyā Viṣṇu is simple and minimal and it is probable that this sculpture dates to no later than the late fourth or early fifth century CE.

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[25] Frederick M. Asher, 'Historical and Political Allegory in Gupta Art', in *Essays on Gupta Culture*, ed. by Bardwell L. Smith (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), pp. 53–66 (p. 60).

[26] Thanks to Roda Ahluwalia for suggesting this identification to me.

[27] Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, p. 13.

10.16. Viṣṇu from Pawāyā, measuring 97 cm in height. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

Palm-Fan Capital (*Tāla*)

10.17. Palm-fan capital from Pawāyā, Gujari Mahal Museum, Gwalior.

This superbly executed sandstone palm-fan capital housing a damaged crouching lion was found at the base of the mound enveloping the terraced structure (Fig. 10.17).[28] It dates to the Gupta period and is a symbol of Saṃkarṣaṇa (Balarāma), elder brother of Kṛṣṇa and a nāga deity affiliated with fertility and agriculture. Similar

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[28] Garde, *Annual Report Gwalior State*, p. 9.

palm-fan pillar capitals have been found at Mathurā (Fig. 10.18), Besnagar, and elsewhere.

10.18. A Śuṅga period palm-fan capital from Mathurā in the State Museum, Lucknow. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

Nāga

A damaged life-sized sculpture of a nāga wearing a floral garland was found during archaeological excavations conducted in 1940 (Fig. 10.19).[29] Like the Viṣṇu sculpture from the same temple, the nāga, with its severed face and partially missing limbs, appears to have been mutilated. The near-naked nāga stands with a serpentine posture. To his rear rests a slender snake in alignment with the central axis of his body (Fig. 19b). The fragmented hood of the serpent would have originally formed a canopy over the head of the male figure. The twisted cloth looped around the nāga's waist is similar to that worn by the Pawāyā Viṣṇu. Garde describes the sculpture as being four-armed, but unfortunately the stumps of only two arms are discernable in the photographs.[30] The figure could represent Balarāma, but the damage is too extensive to identify him with any certainty. The sculpture probably dates to the late fourth or

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[29] Garde, *Annual Administration Report, Year 1939-1940*, p. 16.
[30] Ibid., p. 16.

early fifth century CE. At least three other nāga heads were found at Pawāyā, but these too are not identifiable.

10.19. Damaged life-size sculpture of a nāga from Pawāyā. (a) The sculpture from the front. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies; (b) the sculpture from the rear, in Garde, *Annual Report, Year 1939-40, Plate IVb.*

If we imagine, however, that this is a depiction of Balarāma/ Saṅkarṣaṇa, then one wonders if this temple could have even been dedicated to the *bhagavats*, Balarāma/ Saṅkarṣaṇa and Kṛṣṇa/ Vāsudeva, who as a pair were popular in early India, although less so by the Gupta period. In the Buddhist Pāli text the *Niddesa*, dated to *circa* the third century BCE, the cult of Balarāma/ Saṅkarṣaṇa and Kṛṣṇa/ Vāsudeva is listed as foremost amongst deity-observances.[31] Moreover, Alexis Sanderson draws attention to several epigraphic records dating from the third to first centuries BCE mentioning the two *bhagavats* (Saṅkarṣaṇa and Vāsudeva) including a fragmentary inscription

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[31] Alexis Sanderson, draft of *Rules and Records*, pp. 21-22.

from Ghosūṇḍī near Chittorgaḍh in Rajasthan probably dating to the first century BCE. It records an enclosure for the worship of the "two Bhagavats Saṅkarṣaṇa and Vāsudeva."[32]Incidentally, there is a damaged plaque depicting the *bhagavats* seated beside one another *in situ* on the temple at Bhītargāon.

***Toraṇa* Lintel**

10.20. One side of a fragment of a stone toraṇa (gateway) lintel from Pawāyā, measuring 195 x 65 x 70 cm. Originally the lintel may have been twice as long. Gujari Mahal Museum, Gwalior. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

The large stone fragment from a *toraṇa* (gateway) lintel belonging to the brick temple is datable on stylistic grounds to the late fourth or early-fifth century CE (Fig. 10.20). Post-holes penetrating its top reveal that this was one of a series of lintels, locked together by vertical brackets. These brackets were most likely intricately carved, and indeed, a beautiful fragment of a bracket from a gateway was found (H50 cm x W45 cm x D40 cm), both sides depicting a female with her arm raised above her head, apparently grasping the branch of a mango tree (Fig. 10.21).[33] Garde does not, however, mention whether this bracket was found in the vicinity of the lintel, but stylistically it is an exact match. This *toraṇa* would probably have been similar in structure to the remarkable gateways at Sāñcī and Bhārhut.

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[32] Ibid., p. 22ff.

[33] Garde, *Annual Report Gwalior State*, p. 24.

10.21. Fragment of a bracket from Pawāyā depicting a Śālabañjika. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

The lintel fragment is sumptuously carved with intimate, detailed and crowded scenes predominantly celebrating the victory of good over evil. Both faces are divided into panels. One side depicts an all female music and dance performance centred around a *bali-pīṭha* (offering altar) (Fig. 10.22).

10.22. Detail of the toraṇa lintel depicting a group of female musicians and a dancer in front of an offering altar. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

This is a valuable scene for musicologists as several ancient instruments are clearly depicted, including a seven-stringed *citrā vīṇā*, described by Richard Widdess as one of the finest portrayals of this type of instrument in Indian art.[34] Although all-female music and dance groups are not particularly common in early art, at least three other

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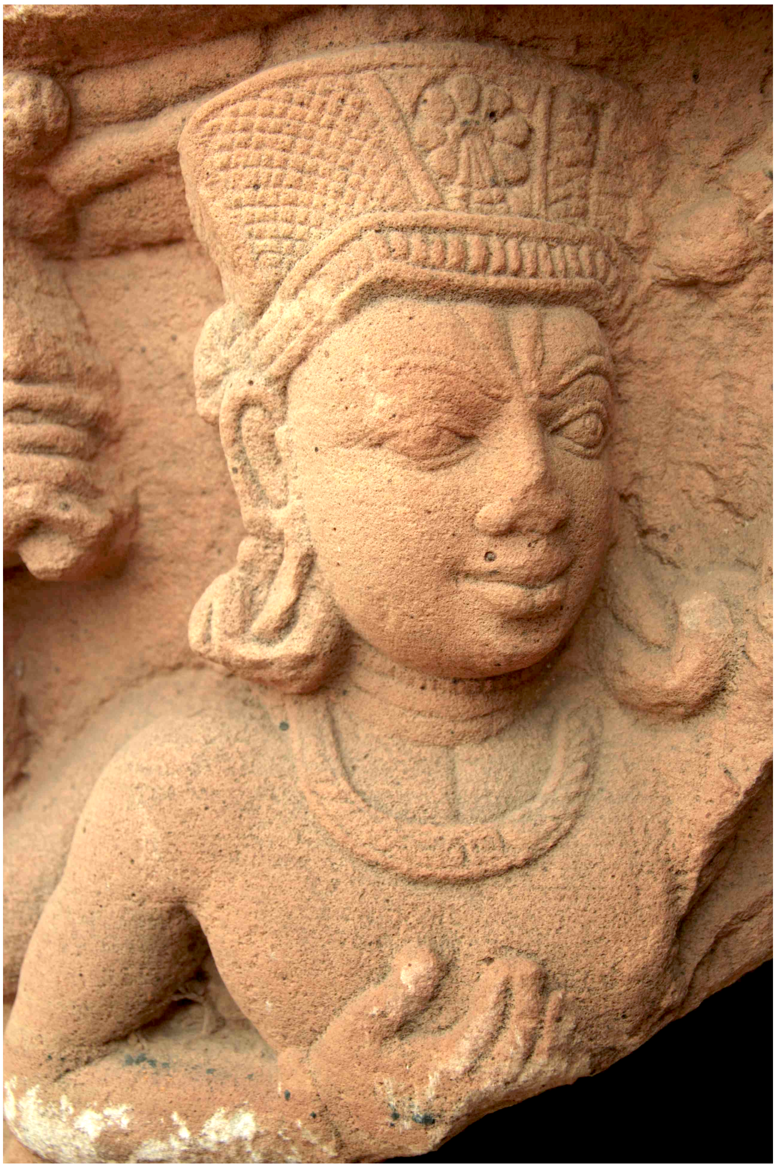
[34] Richard Widdess, Personal Communication (2011). Richard also described to me the other instruments depicted in this scene. The woman on the bottom left is playing a pear-shaped lute, possibly the instrument known as a *kacchapī vīṇā*. Above her sits a woman playing (a now fragmented) transverse flute known as a *vaṃśa*. In the top left is a women playing three barrel drums, commonly depicted in early art. These types of drums have names such as *puṣkara* and *mṛdaṇga*. The women seated next to her might be a singer. Second from the right is a woman who may be playing a pair of cymbals (called *tāla* or *kaṃsyatāla*), or possibly clapping her hands. Her job is to mark specific beats to indicate the metrical structure. Beneath the lady with a fan is a woman playing a small kettle drum – highly unusual in ancient art. Lastly, the women in the bottom right plays a seven-stringed *citrā vīṇā*, a type of arched harp which ceased to be either played or depicted from the sixth century onwards.

depictions dating to the fifth century survive; namely a relief carving on a sidewall of Cave 5 at Udayagiri, a sumptuous painted mural in Cave 1 at Ajaṇṭā, and a fragmented stone relief carving from Deogaṛh and on display at the National Museum in New Delhi.

10.23. Detail of the toraṇa lintel depicting Viṣṇu in his Trivikrama form with his consort Lakṣmī, the moon god Candra, and an attendant figure. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

Next to this is a scene illustrating the sacrifice of Bali, a ritual attended by Vāmana (Viṣṇu in his dwarf form). This is followed by the second and more ancient part of the myth portraying Viṣṇu in his *Trivikrama* form, in the act of regaining the entire cosmos for the gods (Figs. 10.23 and 10.24).[35] Here, Viṣṇu holds a number of attributes; namely a sword, a *cakra*, a mace, and possibly a garland. One of his hands rests against his chest while the remaining three hands are lost. With his sword, Viṣṇu is in the act of effortlessly slaying a tiny ghoulish figure, whose legs and arms are outstretched, positioned at the very top of the panel. Following behind the god is his consort Lakṣmī, holding a lotus flower on a long stem. To her rear is a female attendant figure holding a fan. In the top left hand corner of the panel is the moon god Candra, seated in his chariot.



10.24. Detail of the toraṇa lintel showing Trivikrama. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

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[35] The Trivikrama myth is referred too several times in the *Ṛgveda*, for example at 1.22.17, 1.54.1, 1.154.3-4, 6.49.13, and 7.100.3.

10.25. Detail of the toraṇa lintel depicting the sacrifice of Bali taking place on the ground floor of a three-storey palace. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

The scene depicting the sacrifice of Bali is discussed at length by Michael Willis (Fig. 10.25).[36] The ritual has been portrayed in minute detail, taking place at the base of a three-storey building, most probably the palace of king Bali. The upper two storeys have pillared balconies on which women stand, and participate in the ceremony below. Alternatively, the women are dancing. It might be suggested that they are the wives of Bali, or at least women belonging to the palace. One of the figures, for instance, wears her hair loose. This is out of the ordinary, and the only such example I know of from this period. Evidently it was not considered proper for women to wear their hair untied in public at this time. This leads me to conclude that

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[36] Willis, *The Archaeology*, pp. 195-97.

these women are behind the scenes, and not intended to be visible to the crowd below. On the right hand side of the palace is a gateway leading from the second storey to the third. This may well be a loose representation of the terraced brick temple in a more celestial setting. Incidentally, a square *havana-kund* full of ash was found beneath the wall of the *adhiṣṭhāna*, on the northeastern corner of the so-called three-storied royal residence, Pravarapura, at Mansar. We can draw parallels between this and the imagery on the Pawāyā lintel.[37]

10.26. The sacrifice of Bali depicted on the jagatī of the temple at Deogaṛh. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

This lintel relief is the earliest depiction of the sacrifice of Bali portrayed with such precision. Another Gupta period illustration of the myth, this time minus the ritual apparatus, however, exists on a severely damaged relief carving from the *jagatī* at Deogaṛh (Fig. 10.26). This severely damaged relief depicts a two-armed figure seated on a bench, possibly the *asura* Bali. Beside him is a small figure with matted hair

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[37] Jagat Pati Joshi and A. K. Sharma, 'The Discovery of Pravarapura', in *Purāmanthana – Current Advances in Indian Archaeology no.3*, ed. by A. K. Sharma, B. R. Mani, and G. S. Khwaja (Nagpur: Dattsons, 2005), p.21.

who, given the context, might be identified as Bali’s preceptor, Śukrācārya. Vāmana sits on the ground beneath the bench and a large but fragmented image of Trivikrama is to the left of the figures.

10.27. Entrance to Cave 19 at Udayagiri with a worn and fragmented image of the churning of the ocean of milk myth depicted in two registers on the door lintel. This photograph was taken by Joseph Beglar in 1875 and shows the lintel in better condition than it is in today. Photograph courtesy of the British Library.

The reverse face of the Pawāyā lintel is more damaged and depicts the churning of the ocean of milk. To the best of my knowledge, the only other example of this scene dating to the Gupta period is on the weathered door lintel of Cave 19 at Udayagiri (Fig. 10.27). Williams has identified a number of figures in the Pawāyā scene including Brahmā, Garuḍa and possibly either Sūrya or a Cakrapuruṣa on the upper register, and the sacred cow Surabhī, Lakṣmī and possibly Vāruṇa holding a noose, Yama with a club and Dhanvantari holding the elixir on the lower register. A number of figures are shown tugging at the tail of the serpent Vāsuki.[38] It is possible that Viṣṇu in his form as the tortoise Kūrma may have been depicted in the missing fragment of this panel.

Next to the ocean of milk scene is a panel depicting Kārttikeya surrounded by six female figures whom Williams identifies as his six-headed consort, Ṣaṣṭhī,[39] but who are far more likely to be the six Kṛttikās,[40] each holding a reed; a myth describing the birth of the god in the *Mahābhārata.*[41] I am not aware of any other image depicting the birth of Kārttikeya in this fashion.[42] Part of the scene is attached to the lintel, while a well-preserved fragment of the other half of the image has survived (Fig. 10.28). Kārttikeya is portrayed here with three heads, although it is probably implied that his other three heads are hidden from view to his rear. Incidentally, the governing deity of the Kṛttikās is Agni, god of the sacrificial fire.[43] It is unlikely to be an accident then, that the Kṛttikās have been depicted on the same lintel as the sacrifice of Bali.

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[38] Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, p. 54.

[39] Ibid., p. 54.

[40] Although there are seven Kṛttikās in total, six of them were wrongly accused of infidelity by the seven seers. Thus, often only six Kṛttikās are depicted.

[41] *Mahābhārata,* trans. by K. M. Ganguli (Calcutta: Pratap Chandra Roy, 1883-1896), 13.86.141 <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m13/m13b051.htm>

[42] Rekha Morris also came to the same conclusion about the identity of the female figures and the particular myth depicted. Morris, p. 89.

[43] Marion Frenger, 'A Terracotta Relief from Ahicchattrā – Sun Barque, Solar Chariot or ...?' In *South Asian Archaeology and Art: Changing Forms and Cultural Identity: Religious and Secular Iconographies, Papers from the 20th Conference of the European Association for South Asian Archaeology and Art Held in Vienna from 4th to 9th of July 2010*, ed. by Deborah Klimburg-Saltzer and Linda Lojda (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), pp. 23-28 (p. 25).

10.28. A fragment of the panel depicting the birth of Kārttikeya.[44]

Lions

A lion with a wavy mane serves as a pedestal for a sculpture, which is lost except for one foot (Fig. 10.29). Also worthy of mention is a fine sculpture of a recumbent, roaring lion with a curly mane and characterful facial features (Figs. 10.30 and 10.31). This sculpture dates to the Gupta period. A strikingly similar fragmented stone lion is located at Eraṇ (Fig. 10.32).[45]

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[44] Garde, *Quinquennial Administration Report*, Plate X.

[45] The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston houses two splendid Gupta period stone lions with manes much like the examples pictured above. One of the lions originates from Besnagar in Madhya Pradesh (accession number: 26.25), while the other hails from Mathurā (accession number: 66.233).

10.29. Gupta period stone lion pedestal from Pawāyā. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

10.30. Side view of a Gupta period stone recumbent lion from Pawāyā. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

10.31. Front view of Gupta period stone lion from Pawāyā. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

10.32. Gupta period stone lion at Eraṇ. Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

Conclusion

The early Gupta period art of Pawāyā is generally of a high quality and rather refined. Indeed, the terracotta reliefs are unusually delicate, although recognisably Gupta in date. Although only fragments of the terracotta plaques have survived, we have conjectured that in all likelihood some popular characters and themes, such as Mahiṣāsuramardinī and the Anantaśayana, found at other contemporaneous temple sites were depicted here. There may also be some parallels with the terraced temple at Mansar demonstrated by the several characterful demonic heads found at both sites. Pawāyā produced some strikingly unique images, such as the relief on the stone lintel depicting the birth of Kārttikeya. This subject is not unique to Pawāyā since Udayagiri is also home to images of Kārttikeya alongside the Kṛttikās; however, the manner in which the myth has been rendered at Pawāyā is entirely original. The depiction of the sacrifice of Bali on the lintel is also singular, and being the earliest visual representation of a sacrifice, of great importance. Moreover, the ritual is portrayed in exacting detail. The pillar capital depicting addorsed Vaiṣṇava figures – possibly Cakrapuruṣas – is the earliest of its type to survive in India and we find slightly later adaptations of this capital at Eraṇ and in Bihar. This tentatively suggests that the ancient city of Padmāvatī may have been quite influential in its heyday.

Lastly, there appears to be a certain emphasis at Pawāyā on representing deities and spirits associated with fertility, water and agriculture, namely, *yakṣas* and *nāgas*. The dominant theme, however, is the supremacy of Viṣṇu and his victorious conquests perhaps evoked here to mirror the Guptas' own. The possibility does exist, however, that this temple was dedicated to the *bhagavats*, Balarāma and Vāsudeva. If this were indeed the case, then it might represent a deliberate effort, perhaps on the part of the Guptas, to promote stability in the region by evoking a harmonious relationship, or partnership even, between the Gupta rulers and the subordinate Nāgas, represented by Viṣṇu or Vāsudeva and Balarāma respectively.

Chapter 11: Iconography at Ahichhatrā

Introduction

Between 1942 and 1944 a series of around eleven large terracotta plaques were found on the upper terrace of the Bhimgaja monument, most of them in a fragmentary state and many of them depicting themes related to the god Śiva.[1] The plaques range from delicate and skillfully executed to somewhat coarse and clumsy. Regardless of variations in skill, however, all are of interest to scholars as they represent early or even, in some instances, the earliest surviving visual depictions of famous myths from the *Mahābhārata*, the *Skandapurāṇa* and other sources. Although incomplete, this is the largest extant collection of figurative terracotta panels from a Gupta period brick Śiva temple, and thus is of considerable importance. A brief formal analysis of the plaques is included in Agrawala's 1948 catalogue on the *Terracotta Figurines of Ahichchhatrā*. Agrawala's analysis of the plaques is often problematic and has since been repeated verbatim by historians such as Shrimali.[2] In this chapter I will, where possible, offer a new or revised reading of the plaques. To begin with, though, it is worth briefly exploring the artistic output at the site dating to *circa* the Gupta period.[3] This will enable us to form an idea, however sketchy it may be, of the religious orientation of the people of Ahichhatrā.

Terracotta Figurines and Plaques from Ahichhatrā

Ahichhatrā ACIII is particularly rich in sculpture. Gods well represented here include Viṣṇu and Sūrya. Eleven fragmented circular plaques of the latter god were found at this location, all of which date to the Gupta and post-Gupta periods.[4] One

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[1] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 63.

[2] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, pp. 127-128.

[3] It should be noted here that to the best of my knowledge, sculptures found since the 1940s excavations have evaded publication.

[4] At least ten fragments belonging to Viṣṇu images were found at ACIII, dating from the Kuṣāṇa period to the post-Gupta period. See Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, pp. 23-24.

such fragment depicts seven horses balancing on their hind legs (Fig. 11.1). On either end of the panel are traces of attendant figures and in the upper left hand corner is the head of a male surrounded by rays. Since Sūrya was probably depicted at the centre of the composition this is more likely to be a secondary character.

11.1. Gupta period Sūrya plaque from ACIII, Ahichhatrā. Reserve collections of the National Museum, New Delhi.

A plaque depicting Agni was also found at this site (Fig. 11.2). The image is badly damaged and much of the surface layer has flaked off. The matted hair of Agni is worn in a topknot, and behind him is a fragmented halo. His identity is revealed by the tongues of flames flickering above his arms. The surviving stump of his right arm is held upwards suggesting that his hand was probably held in *abhaya mudrā*, while his left hand rests against his thigh. He wears a *dhotī* and a belt tied around his waist. A twisted shawl tied twice around his left arm, is looped around his lower body. The Gaṅgā plaque from ACI also shows the goddess with fabric tied two times around her arm, evidently a fashion at the time. Agrawala dates the Agni relief to between 550 and 650 CE, but based on style it is probably Gupta in date.[5]

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[5] Ibid., p. 27.

11.2. Terracotta relief from Ahichhatrā ACIII depicting Agni. National Museum, New Delhi.

11.3. Fragment of a terracotta figurine from Ahichhatrā depicting Gaṇeśa (since the god has been depicted with a diadem here, it is highly likely that he dates to the post-Gupta period). Reserve collections of the National Museum, New Delhi.

Eight terracottas depicting Gaṇeśa were discovered at Ahichhatrā, three belonging to ACIII (Fig. 11.3). It is evident that this location was also important for goddess worship. Of twenty terracottas depicting Mahiṣāsuramardinī, seven of them are from ACIII.[6] Two fragmented representations of the goddess Cāmuṇḍā were also found here; namely, a skeletal bust of Cāmuṇḍā (Fig. 11.4), and a headless sculpture of the emaciated goddess measuring over a metre in height and seated on a pedestal with two corpses (Fig. 11.5). The latter probably belongs to the late Gupta or post-Gupta period.[7] The bust of Cāmuṇḍā has emaciated ribs, an inverted belly, and drooping breasts. On one breast a scorpion is clearly depicted, while fragments of what appear to be another scorpion also survive on her other breast. Cāmuṇḍā's upper arms are

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[6] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 29.

[7] Ibid., p. 29. The current location of the seated Cāmuṇḍā is not known.

scrawny and twig-like. This is one of a series of four terracotta mother goddess busts of a similar scale housed at the National Museum in New Delhi; in all probability they belonged to a Mātṛkā shrine.

11.4. Terracotta sculpural fragment from Ahichhatrā ACIII depicting the bust of Cāmuṇḍā. National Museum, New Delhi.

Twelve images of the naked woman Koṭavī (sometimes counted among the Mātṛkās) who symbolizes adversity and protects against evil were uncovered at Ahichhatrā, four of them at ACIII. The characterful, moustachioed head of Narasiṃha, the man-lion *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, was found at ACIII (Fig. 11.6). Incidentally, several *satī* plaques dating from the medieval period (850-1100 CE) were also discovered at this site.[8]

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[8] Ibid., p. 74.

11.5. Terracotta sculpture from Ahichhatrā ACIII, depicting Cāmuṇḍā. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

11.6. Terracotta fragment from Ahichhatrā depicting Narasiṃha. Reserve collection of the National Museum, New Delhi.

Several terracotta images of the goat headed deity Naigameśa (or Naigameya), originally the principle deity of childbirth, were found at Ahichhatrā, many of them at ACIII.[9] Naigameśa is a form of Skanda and was also popular at Mathurā and Rājghāṭ among other places. A couple of female goat-headed figurines were also found at ACIII and Agrawala interprets them as being a form of Skanda's consort Ṣaṣṭhī.[10] A small head of Naigameśa and the head and upper torso of his female counterpart are preserved in the reserve collections of the National Museum in New Delhi. The tiny National Museum Naigameśa is simplistic in its iconography, depicting an eyeless god with a narrow but enormous hooknose and a slit for the mouth. The ears are long and characterised by a slit (Fig. 11.7).

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[9] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, pp. 31-32.
[10] Ibid., p. 31.

11.7. Terracotta Naigameśa from Ahichhatrā. Reserve collection of the National Museum, New Delhi.

The State Museum in Allahabad houses several terracotta fragments from Ahichhatrā, although regrettably their find spots within the site have not been recorded. One particularly lovely fragment from a Gupta period relief panel depicts a woman standing in profile beneath a custard apple tree (*sitaphala*), her voluminous hair twisted into an elegant bun (Fig. 11.8). With one hand she touches her breast and with the other makes a gesture to suggest that she is plucking fruit from the tree. She may be a *śālabañjikā* (women under a tree or tree spirit) common in early Indian sculpture. The sitaphala tree is symbolic of prosperity and fertility, and since the female figure touches both the tree and her breast, it is evident that she too represents fertility.

Another Gupta plaque from Ahichhatrā held at the Allahabad Museum depicts three figures engaged in a dynamic fighting scene (Figs. 11.9 and 11.10). The plaque may illustrate the demon Pralamba on whose shoulders sits Balarāma, with Kṛṣṇa running behind. Here Balarāma is shown about to strike the demon. The rapid movement of the figures is creatively captured through Balarāma’s plaited hair flying in opposite directions. The composition and style of this plaque is strikingly different from the terracotta panel in the Pritzker collection depicting the same myth and described in Chapter 9.

11.8. Fragment of a terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā depicting a śālabañjikā. State Museum, Allahabad.

11.9. Terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā depicting Pralamba, Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa. State Museum, Allahabad.

11.10. Detail of terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā depicting Pralamba, Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa. State Museum, Allahabad.

The museum also houses two terracotta fragments from Ahichhatrā depicting *nāga* deities.[11] The first dates to the Gupta period and is part of a lunette or roundel, delicately modelled (Fig. 11.11). Originally, the male figure probably had a canopy composed of seven snakes but most of the plaque is lost. The figure is regal and wears a diadem and has crimped hair. It is possible that these fragments belonged to one temple unearthed sometime after the 1940s excavations.

11.11. Fragment of a terracotta Gupta period lunette or roundel from Ahichhatrā depicting a nāga, measuring 17 x 11 x 11 cm. Reserve collection of the State Museum, Allahabad.

The iconography of the second fragment is less developed and depicts a *nāga* with a single snake hood merging into his forehead (Fig. 11.12a). The scales of the snake are portrayed to the rear of the figure using stamped circles (Fig. 11.12b). A *nāga* or *nāginī* head from ACIII was unearthed during excavations in the early 1940s. Much of the detail has flaked off, but like a number of the reliefs and sculptures from ACI, clay with a high density of mica has been used (Fig. 11.13). The most popular *nāga*

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[11] Sculptures of *nāgas* and their female counterparts, *nāginīs*, are found at numerous Gupta sites including at Bhītargāon and Pawāyā. A terracotta relief depicting a *nāga* divinity – possibly Balarāma – seated with legs crossed (*padmāsana*), and a large snake canopy of seven heads was situated in a niche on the temple of Bhītargāon. Zaheer reports, however, that the plaque measuring 32 x 28 cm was stolen. See Zaheer, p. 88, Fig. 68.

deities are Balarāma/ Saṅkarṣaṇa and Ananta (the latter is usually only depicted with Viṣṇu), though royal *nāga* couples are also portrayed. As Shaw comments, the ‘regalisation’ of *nāgas* is a development that occurs during the Gupta period and possibly arose out of the conscious effort of local Nāga dynasties, especially in the Vidiśā region to reassert their power.[12]

11.12. (a) Front of a terracotta nāga head from Ahichhatrā, measuring 10 x 8 x 8.5 cm; (b) rear of a terracotta nāga head. State Museum, Allahabad.

11.13. Head of a nāga or nāginī from Ahichhatrā, ACIII. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

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[12] Julia Shaw, *Buddhist Landscapes in Central India: Sanchi Hill and Archaeologies of Religious and Social Change, c. Third Century BC to Fifth Century AD* (London: British Association of South Asian Studies, 2007), p. 186.

A unique rectangular terracotta plaque dating to the fifth or sixth century CE was discovered on a temple wall in the village of Lachmīpur near Ahichhatrā.[13] The plaque depicts seven female figures standing in a crescent-shaped cart with a spoked-wheel at the centre. Surrounding them is a large orb decorated with 'Y'-shapes in opposing directions incised into the clay. Agrawala interprets this as being a solar plaque, with the orb symbolically representing Sūrya.[14] Frenger, however, offers a new reading of the relief, and identifies the females as the seven Kṛttikās who, besides being wives of the seven seers (*saptarṣis*), are also wives of the moon god, Candra. Moreover, together the Kṛttikās comprise one *nakṣatra*, and in many texts, such as the *Atharvaveda* and the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā*, they are considered as the first *nakṣatra*. In contrast to Agrawala, Frenger argues that the orb represents the moon.[15] A fascinating aspect of this plaque is that no detail is insignificant. The 'Y'-shapes, for example, may represent the course of the moon through the different *nakṣatra*s or lunar mansions, while the nineteen spokes of the wheel might allude to the luni-solar cycle, which takes nineteen solar years to complete.[16]

This brief summary of figurative sculpture at Ahichhatrā has highlighted a few dominant themes: the Mātṛkās, as well as popular deities such as Gaṇeśa, Mahiṣāsuramardinī and Sūrya. Śiva also has a significant presence at the site as exemplified by the several large plaques from Bhimgaja discussed later in the chapter. In contrast to the mass of Śaiva relief sculpture, the Vaiṣṇava presence was relatively minor though not insignificant.[17] It is evident that while the Brahmanical gods became dominant during the Kuṣāṇa and Gupta periods, minor divinities such as *nāgas*, *śālabañjikās* and other *yakṣas* and *yakṣīs*, the goat-headed Naigameśa and his female counterpart, a three-headed goddess – possibly Ṣaṣṭhī – and the naked woman Koṭavī, among others, also played an important role in the religious life of Ahichhatrā. Many of the latter represent fertility, protect against disease, protect mothers in pregnancy and childbirth, protect children, and protect agriculture, and thus it is no wonder that

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[13] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 26.

[14] Ibid., p. 26.

[15] Frenger, p. 25.

[16] Ibid., p. 26.

[17] Of interest is a copper seal found at Ahichhatrā and now at the Allahabad Museum (no. AH/300). The seal, Shrimali writes, bears 'the legend *vāma-viṣṇu* in Gupta script of *c.* fifth century AD. It has been suggested that the seal belonged to a temple of Hari-Hara because the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* enumerates *vāma* as one of the eleven Rudras.' See Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 127.

they had an enduring popularity. As Agarwal writes: ‘The diversity in archaeological remains from both Mathura and Ahichchhatra reflects great complexity with regard to religious practices and rituals, and fertility rites would have constituted a minor component in the compound whole.’[18]

Gaṅgā and Yamunā

Assuredly, two of the greatest masterpieces of the Gupta period are the much-restored life-size terracotta depictions of Gaṅgā and Yamunā from Ahichhatrā, modelled in high relief and situated on pedestals (Figs. 11.14 and 11.15). The sculptures were recovered in poor condition (Fig. 11.16). Indeed, in *Indian Archaeology – A Review 1955-56*, Ghosh writes:

> The restoration of the Ganga and Yamuna images, found in innumerable fragments in an excavated temple at Ahichchhatra, was completed. The materials chemically analysed and examined consisted of metal, glazes, cementing material, mortar and water and stone samples.[19]

The terracotta shimmers with mica, which was no doubt intentional. As discussed in chapter 6, the goddesses were situated in niches on the west face of ACI, on the outer wall of the second platform, probably on either side of a grand staircase. We can only imagine what a spectacular entrance to the upper platform this would have made. The modelling of the figures is surprisingly confident, and the style bold and earthy, yet refined and skillfully executed. Gaṅgā and a small attendant girl to her rear both stand on a now headless *makara* (Fig. 11.17).

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[18] Agarwal, p.245.

[19] *Indian Archaeology – A Review 1955-56*, ed. by A. Ghosh (New Delhi: Department of Archaeology, 1956), p. 56.

11.14. Gaṅgā plaque in high relief measuring 171 x 74 x 40 cm. National Museum, New Delhi.

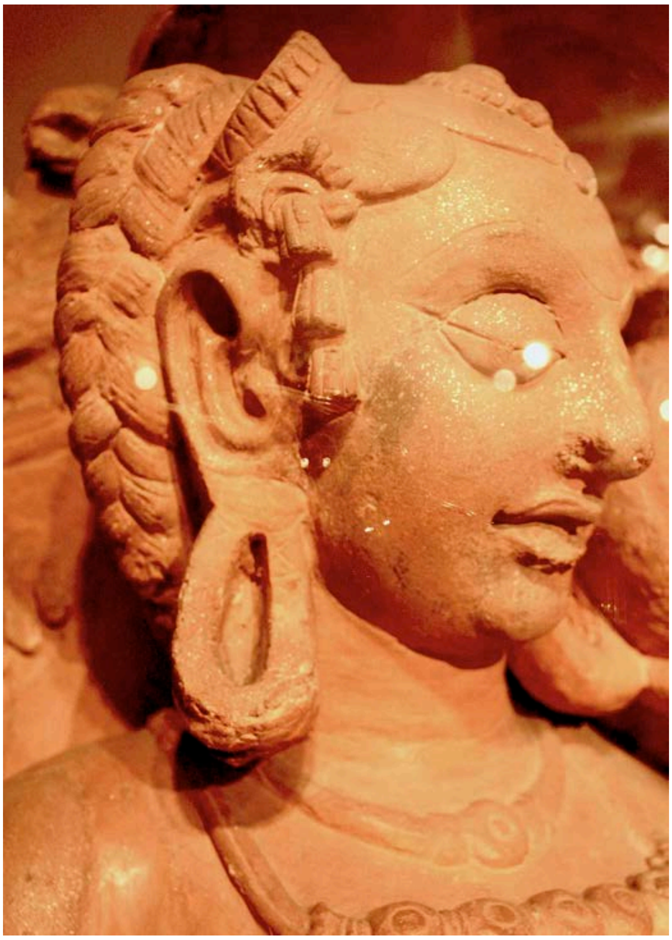
Gaṅgā's right arm is lowered and her hand is lost. Her left arm is raised and she balances a large water pot, embellished with incised motifs, on the palm of her hand. Over the goddess, the attendant holds a parasol from which pleated ribbons cascade like water. Gaṅgā's hair is worn in a trefoil arrangement and plaited at the back of her head (Fig. 11.18). Her coiffure is adorned with jewels and with tassels or strings of flowers, in the manner of Classical Indian dancers today. Her substantial drop-shaped earrings almost touch her shoulders. Her deep-set eyes are large even by Gupta standards, heavily lidded and framed by sweeping eyebrows. Her nose is unusually strong and distinctive for a Gupta female, and her nostrils are especially well defined.

Her lips are plump and slightly parted but she does not bear the slight smile so common on figures from this period. Her clothing is even more idiosyncratic; her blouse consists of a length of fabric wrapped around her breasts and twice around her right arm (Fig. 11.19a). The fabric is tied in a knot beneath her breasts. The lower half of her breasts have been left exposed. Her skirt is mid-calf length and stretched tightly around her shapely lower body celebrating her voluptuous form. A flower hangs from her waistband. She wears two necklaces, two pairs of bracelets, two pairs of beaded anklets and several toe rings. The attendant is dressed almost identically and faces away from Gaṅgā and towards the viewer (Fig. 11.19b).

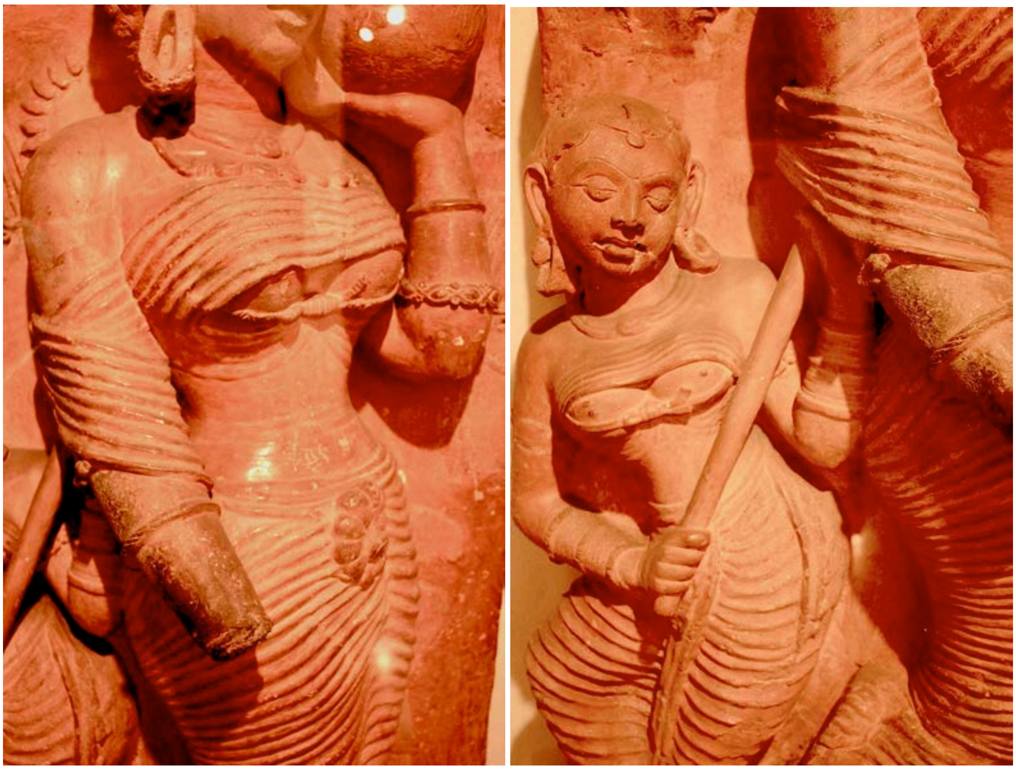
11.15. Yamunā plaque in high relief measuring 178 x 69 x 42 cm. National Museum, New Delhi.

11.16. The Yamunā sculpture before restoration. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

11.17. Detail of Gaṅgā sculpture from Ahichhatrā ACI.



11.18. Detail of Gaṅgā sculpture from Ahichhatrā ACI.



11.19. *(a) Detail of the Gaṅgā sculpture; (b) Gaṅgā's attendant holding a parasol.*

11.20. *(a) head of Yamunā; (b) raised arm of Yamunā showing her wide embossed bangle.*

The Yamunā relief is similar except the goddess sports a different hairstyle, this time an arrangement of tight curls plaited at the nape of her neck. There are also variations in her jewellery and small differences in her attire. Her skirt is elegant, and executed with flair. It successfully conveys a sense of movement and is probably intended to represent flowing water, while the edge of her wrap-round skirt resembles a meandering river. On her left thigh a whirlpool has been depicted. This sculpture poetically, and cleverly portrays the goddess both as a woman and as a river. This level of detail is testament to the ingenuity of the Gupta period artists. Yamunā stands on a tortoise flanked by two attendant figures, a small male to her right and a female to her left. Unusually the male figure is clothed in an ankle-length striped *dhotī*, a long-sleeved top with a curious patch or insignia beneath the neckline on the left, and a cap. His dress is quite Kuṣāṇa in style, and might possibly represent Central Asian attire. He holds a rope between his two hands. His expression is a little fierce, but of all the faces depicted here, his is arguably the most characteristically Gupta. Interestingly, the faces of the river goddesses with their slightly beaky noses, plump, strongly defined lips, sweeping incised eyebrows and long eyes, are very similar to a terracotta head of a woman from ACI found during excavation of the monument (Fig. 11.22).

11.21. (a) female attendant of Yamunā; (b) male attendant of Yamunā.

Likewise, the beautiful terracotta head of a woman from an unrecorded location in Ahichhatrā shows a strong resemblance to the river goddesses, especially in the shape of her face and in her long eyes, prominent nose and altogether striking features (Fig. 11.23). The sculptural fragment is on display at the Allahabad State Museum and dates to *circa* the fifth century CE. Most surprising, however, is the similarity between the faces of Gaṅgā, Yamunā and their attendants, with a terracotta head from the Brooklyn Museum, already pictured in Chapter 9 (Fig. 11.24). The features are so alike, that it might be suggested that the latter head also hails from ACI. Lastly, it should be noted that the composition of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā plaques is similar to those of the river goddess panels at Bhītargāon.

11.22. Profile view of a terracotta head of a woman from ACI. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

11.23. Terracotta head of a woman from Ahichhatrā, measuring 12.8 x 10 x 9 cm. Fifth century CE. State Museum, Allahabad.

11.24. (a) Detail of Gaṅgā's attendant; (b) terracotta head in the Brooklyn Museum.

In striking contrast to these magnificent goddesses, is another considerably smaller Gupta period plaque from Ahichhatrā housed in the reserve collection of the State Museum, Allahabad (Fig. 11.25). Though in poor condition, this figure has been identified as depicting the goddess Gaṅgā. Interestingly, she is clothed in foreign dress consisting of a shapely tunic with a semi-circular hemline and trousers. A dancer depicted in an exquisite mural from Cave 1 at Ajaṇṭā wears a remarkably similar outfit in beautiful shades of dark green and yellow.[20] This type of dress is also worn by a veiled female figure in a fragmented terracotta plaque from Pawāyā.

11.25. Terracotta female figure from Ahichhatrā identified as the goddess Gaṅgā, measuring 33 x 20 cm. State Museum, Allahabad.

The figure in the Ahichhatrā plaque has a halo but her head is lost. The base of a parasol with ribbons, sits above her right shoulder. She appears to be holding a

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[20] Behl, pp. 90-91.

garland or fabric between her missing hands. On the lower right hand side of the plaque, a small fragmented head - presumably that of an attendant figure - can be made out. The lower part of the plaque is lost and thus there is no vehicle by which to confidently identify the characters. The border of the plaque is incised with diamonds, each with a dot at the centre. The panel is relatively crude and demonstrates how diverse the art from a single site can be.

Rivers became sacrosanct from early times in India and none more so than the holy Gangā, and to a lesser extent the Yamunā. As the *Mahābhārata* tells us, the Yamunā is "a river that delivers from evil" (Mbh III. 83. 55-56).[21] While in Srinivasan's words, 'the Gangā is labelled "sacred" in the epic which contains many verses in honour of its greatness and sanctifying activity.'[22] By the close of the Gupta period, the personified river goddesses Gangā and Yamunā were an established feature of temple doorjambs. Kramrisch describes this positioning as being a metaphorical *tīrtha* (a sacred ford), serving to cleanse devotees of worldly imperfections as they crossed the threshold of a temple before proceeding to the sanctum sanctorum (*garbhagṛha*).[23]

Some Characteristics of Terracotta Relief Sculpture at Ahichhatrā

Many of the figures in the Ahichhatrā plaques from the Bhimgaja monument do not embody a physical ideal. On close inspection a clearcut distinction between the type of figure depicted becomes evident; for example, gods, goddesses and royalty are noble in appearance with straight noses, lotus-like eyes and ideal physiques. Furthermore, they are often bedecked in ornaments and wear elaborate hairstyles or headdresses. As elsewhere in Gupta period sculpture, the *aghora* and unruly forms of Śiva are an exception to this rule; these, along with depictions of *gaṇas* and other attendants, are shown with protruding goggly eyes, snub noses and squat figures. This demonstrates that there was a reason for the apparent disparity in finesse between the figurative panels. One could then conjecture that perceived clumsiness is not always

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[21] Srinivasan, p. 226.
[22] Ibid., p. 226.
[23] Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple II* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991, 1st edn 1946), p. 315.

an indication of poor craftsmanship. Based on style, however, it is evident that the plaques were made by different *pustakāras* (modellers-in-clay) of varying ability. Each *pustakāra* or, possibly, each atelier, seems to have made at least one pair of panels, perhaps to speed up the process. The pairs can be distinguished based on style, theme, and sometimes by border motifs; for example, the image tentatively identified as depicting the temptation of Sage Nārāyaṇa is paired with the so-called *kinnara-mithuna* plaque; the Bhikṣāṭanamūrti or Nīlalohita plaque with the panel depicting an unidentifiable form of Śiva; and the plaque depicting Dakṣa's sacrifice is paired with that portraying *gaṇas* stealing sweets. This observation might help to make sense of the stylistic diversity present here. Lastly, the possibility exists that the plaques do not all belong to the same period.

Plaques from ACI

Caṇḍeśvara

The current location of this plaque is unknown – if indeed it has survived – and nor has an image of it been published, although we have Agrawala's description:

> Plaque (15" x 11" x 4") showing a four-armed standing figure with an axe (*paraśu*) held in right hand. The distinguishing symbol of *ūrdhva-retas* (erect *membrum virile*) shows him to be Śiva as Lakulīśa, an aspect specially worshipped by the Pāśupata sect of Śaivas.[24]

Agrawala indentified this figure as Lakulīśa, a Pāśupata deity and a manifestation of Śiva. He is usually depicted carrying a staff, but the figure in this plaque holds an axe and thus it is probable that he represents Caṇḍeśvara rather than Lakulīśa, a common misreading. Caṇḍeśvara's role is varied and diverse, as Dominic Goodall describes:

> [Caṇḍeśvara is] variously treated as a guardian to Śaiva shrines, as a warrior leader of the *gaṇas*, as the consumer of offerings that have been made to Śiva, as

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[24] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 65. It should be pointed out that Agrawala's use of the term *ūrdhva-retas* is idiosyncratic, as the term is generally used to refer to chastity since it translates as 'holding the semen up' (Simon Brodbeck, Personal Communication).

> the punisher of the transgressions of Śaiva initiates, as Śiva’s agent in property transactions, as the transmitter of Śaiva knowledge and as a super-*bhakta* who severed his own father’s legs because of his father’s impiety. Some evidence suggests that Caṇḍeśvara is a form of Śiva or a manifestation of his anger, but other evidence presents him as a *gaṇa*, as Śiva’s chief devotee or his principle servant.[25]

In essence, Caṇḍeśvara appears to be a fierce and unforgiving deity – one of a number of similarly terrific, powerful manifestations of Śiva or members of his entourage depicted on plaques from this temple.

A ‘Unique’ Form of Bhairava

Following the monsoon season in 2011 an extraordinary fragment of a terracotta plaque was found in the vicinity of Bhimgaja (Fig. 11.26). Although this was a surface find, there is little doubt that it belongs to the large Śiva monument, both because of its subject matter and because of its close stylistic similarity particularly to the Rudra Nīlalohita/ Bhairava panel from the same temple. The fragment was brought to my attention by Bhuvan Vikrama and has not been published elsewhere.

The fragment depicts a three-headed male with flaming hair sticking up on end. His eyes are large and round, and his arched eyebrows almost meet in the middle lending him a fearsome appearance. Each of his heads bears a third eye. The damage makes it difficult to ascertain how many arms he has, although it is probably either six or eight. His upper two arms are raised above his head and in his hands he holds a stylised garland, which forms a loop around his entire body and is embellished with evenly spaced floral discs. He is ithyphallic and wears a striped *dhotī***.** His left leg is raised high and bent at the knee, suggesting that he may be trampling on a demon. In his lower right hand he holds what appears to be a trident while the attribute in his lower left hand is lost. By far the most surprising feature of this god are the tongues of flames protruding serpent-like from each of his three mouths. His third eye and ithyphallic form make him instantly recognizable as a manifestation of Śiva, and with

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[25] Goodall, p. 351.

his blazing hair, and his terrific, frightening countenance, he must be a Bhairava image, albeit a most unusual one.[26]

11.26. A fragment from a terracotta plaque found in a field near Ahichhatrā ACI in 2011. Photograph courtesy of Bhuvan Vikrama.

Owing to the obscurity of this image and absence of any comparative material it is only possible to offer hypotheses rather than conclusions. Initially, I tentatively identified this figure as Vīrabhadra who plays a key role in the myth of Dakṣa's sacrifice as told in the *Mahābhārata* (12.284). In this myth, which is also represented in two surviving plaques from the Bhimgaja temple, Śiva:

> From his mouth [created] a terrible being whose very sight could make one's hair stand on end. The blazing flames that emanated from his body rendered him

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[26] Many thanks to Doris Meth Srinivasan, Hans Bakker, Doria Tichit, Ellen Raven, Peter Bisschop, Alexis Sanderson and Adam Hardy who all offered their opinions on this fragment, and all agreed that it is unique.

> exceedingly awful to behold. His arms were many in number and in each was a weapon that struck the beholder with fear.

This image does not, however, resemble any other known images of Vīrabhadra who is generally depicted with one head and holding a sword and shield. Vīrabhadra, then, is an unlikely candidate for the identity of this figure.

The deity is depicted with three heads, but it is not beyond reason that, figuratively speaking, this is intended as a five-headed deity with one head hidden from view at the rear, and one head invisible since it is unmanifest, situated on top facing upwards. In this instance he would probably be a depiction of Mahābhairava. We do, however, still have the problem of the tongues of flames. To the best of my knowledge, there is no description of a flame-mouthed deity in either the *Purāṇas* or the *Mahābhārata*. Nor have I seen a comparable example in the visual arts. Here, though, Alexis Sanderson has drawn my attention to the Kashmirian Śaiva ritual manual, the *Ksetrapālapūjāpaddhati*, which describes Vaṭukabhairava and the Kṣetrapāla, Rāṣṭrādhipati, having flaming mouths.[27] A Kṣetrapāla is a fierce guardian deity of the fields or local area who is usually associated with Śiva, and sometimes with Viṣṇu. Rāṣṭrādhipati seems to be a fairly obscure deity, while extant temple images of Vaṭukabhairava do not show him with flaming tongues. This does not rule out the possibility that the Ahichhatrā relief depicts either Vaṭukabhairava or Rāṣṭrādhipati, especially since iconography was still at its formative stage during the Gupta period.

Lastly, a composite form of Śiva or Rudra and Agni might be put forward as a possibility.[28] The three tongues of flames could represent the three sacrificial fires of Agni. In later Vedic literature, as in the *Mahābhārata*, Śiva is sometimes called

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[27] Written communication from Alexis Sanderson, 2013: ‘The flames dividing into three tongues that emerge from the three mouths fit the description of Vaṭuka and certain other Kṣetrapālas-Bhairavas in the Kashmirian Śaiva ritual manual (Kṣetrapālapūjāpaddhati) that I mentioned, where we see the epithets agnimukha- ‘fire-mouthed', i.e. 'with flaming mouths' and jvālāmukha- 'flame-mouthed', i.e. 'emitting flames from his mouths'. Both epithets appear in the mantra in which Vaṭukabhairava is invoked and the latter is also found in that for the Kṣetrapāla called Rāṣṭrādhipati 'Ruler of the Realm', who is worshipped at the centre of the Maṇḍala of the recipients of offerings in this pūjā, which is essentially the presentation of bali offerings for protection, surrounded by other Kṣetrapālas, animal-headed Yoginīs, and Bhūtas. Among the other Kṣetrapālas, Vetālabhairava/Vetālarājānaka and Pūrṇarājānaka are also jvālāmukha- in their Bali Mantras and the former is also described in his visualisation-verses (dhyāna ślokāḥ) as jvālākeśa- and jvālākaca- 'flame-haired'.’

[28] Caroline Riberaigua was also of the opinion that this figure may be a composite form of Agni and Rudra (Personal Communication, 2014).

Agni.[29] Moreover, fire (Dahana) is described as one of the eleven Rudras in the *Mahābhārata*.[30] From *circa* the tenth century onwards, images of Mārttaṇḍa-Bhairava, a composite form of Śiva and Sūrya (closely associated with Agni) became popular. Nevertheless, these sculptures do not remotely resemble the deity in the Ahichhatrā plaque and indeed are positively docile in comparison.

Describing early images of Śiva from Northwest India, Srinivasan writes:

> The images with multiple bodily parts seem to have little in common with each other. Ranging from the time of Huviṣka through the fourth century A.D., they are sufficiently distinct from one another to suppose that each represents a different Śaiva god, or a different aspect.[31]

This explanation most probably applies to the slightly later yet equally unique fragment from Ahichhatrā.

Rudra Nīlalohita?

This plaque depicts a figure usually identified as Bhairava (Fig. 11.27).[32] The deity stands in a dynamic posture with his knees bent and his four arms raised as though poised to attack. His mouth is open, displaying his tongue and teeth. Beneath his missing nose sits an impressive moustache. His protruding eyes are wide and frenzied and further enhanced by thick, expressive eyebrows. His ear lobes are of considerable length. He has three deep-set lines across the forehead and a third eye. His hair stands on end, as with the three-headed Bhairava image discussed above. He wears a snake draped around his upper body and tied in a loose knot next to the left side of his abdomen. His belly is pronounced and round, but the surface layer of the terracotta has flaked away taking any detail with it. He wears a striped *dhotī* and beaded anklets. A buffalo is draped over his right shoulder and with one hand he clasps an upturned horn. His fragmented upper left hand reaches behind his shoulder to grasp the hind leg of the animal. In his other right hand he holds a tall trident (*triśūla*). In one of his left hands he holds a palm-leaf fan (*tālavṛnta)*, an article usually held by Buddhist monks.

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[29] Sukumari Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony: A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology from the Vedas to the Purāṇas* (Delhi: Molital Banarsidass, 1988), p. 181.

[30] Ibid., p. 181.

[31] Srinivasan, p. 267.

[32] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 64.

Agrawala mistakenly identifies this as being either a club or a mace following the usual convention.[33]

11.27. Terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā ACI measuring 62 x 62 x 9 cm. Housed in the National Museum, New Delhi. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

There are two highly unusual features here which makes the identification of the figure as Bhairava problematic: Firstly, the presence of the buffalo, and secondly the palm-leaf fan. The buffalo is surely a slain demon – this is the only logical explanation for it being draped over the shoulders of the Śaiva deity. Interestingly, a fragment from

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[33] Ibid., p. 64.

Mansar depicts a damaged Śaiva figure wearing the head of either a buffalo or a ram as the centerpiece of his crown (Fig. 11.28).[34]

11.28. A sculptural fragment from Mansar, possibly depicting Nīlalohita. Photograph courtesy of Sasai.

About this fragment Bisschop writes:

> In *Skandapurāṇa* 7, after the deposit of the skull at Mahākapāla, the Chief of the Gaṇas (presumably Nīlalohita) orders the Gaṇas to attack a buffalo-demon Hālāhala who is attracted by the roar of the Gaṇas. Here we seem to meet the same character Nīlalohita, just after the decapitation of Brahmā, engaged in fighting a buffalo-demon.[35]

Bisschop's argument is persuasive, and it is plausible that the figure in the Ahichhatrā plaque may also depict Nīlalohita, although not perhaps the same part of the myth.[36]

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[34] Peter Bisschop kindly drew my attention to this.

[35] Bisschop, 'The Skull on Śiva's Head', p. 14.

[36] While the *Skandapurāṇa* post-dates the temple sculptures in question, earlier versions of the myth must have already been in existence.

The frenzied appearance of the deity in the Ahichhatrā panel suggests that it portrays Nīlalohita directly after he has slain the buffalo demon Hālāhala. The two depictions are far from being identical; the Mansar figure, for example, does not have a third eye and wears a *kapāla* (skull) in his crown. As for similarities, both figures sport impressive moustaches.

As mentioned in a previous chapter, Nīlalohita is a manifestation of Rudra in the form of a *gaṇa*. In the *Skandapurāṇa* it is described how he was born out of a drop of blood on Brahmā's brow (SkP. 5.1.2.24-26); blood which had 'oozed from Brahmā's forehead when he wiped away the sweat as he sacrificed into the fire caused by his self-glory.'[37] In his discussion on the Mansar sculptures, Bisschop raises the possibility of a symbolic meaning for the buffalo head beyond that of solely representing Hālāhala. This is of interest to us, not least because it connects Nīlalohita and the slain demon, albeit in a rather long-winded and dubious fashion, to Dakṣa's sacrifice.

> The buffalo-head, of course, also bears a natural connection to death-symbolism in general, if only because the buffalo is the emblem of the god of death, Yama. The image may therefore be thought of as representing Śiva's conquest of death. Finally, according to Śiva's announcement in the *Skandapurāṇa* 5.64, uttered after Brahmā's decapitation, Nīlalohita is the very same person who will wear Brahmā's head and cut off Yajña's head. The animal could then represent the head of sacrifice (Yajña). However, that presents us with a problem of the identity of the animal, since the latter fled in the form of a deer (mṛga) at Dakṣa's sacrifice: cf. *Skandapurāṇa* (SPBh) 32.54-55.[38]

The second anomaly in this plaque is the palm-leaf fan. Normally such an article would only be held by an attendant figure usually employed in fanning the Buddha. Could its inclusion in the Śaiva plaque be signifying the appropriation of a Buddhist attribute by an avenging god? Or is it simply that Nīlalohita as a *gaṇa* (though confusingly a *gaṇa* who is in fact Rudra) is entitled to carry a symbol associated with servitude? Or is the fearsome deity cooling himself after slaying the buffalo demon?[39] Agrawala describes an image of Mahiṣāsuramardinī found in ACIII and apparently

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[37] Swami Parmeshwaranand, *Encyclopedia of the Śaivism, Volume I* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2004), p. 279.

[38] Bisschop, 'The Skull on Śiva's Head', p. 14ff.

[39] Michael Willis, Personal Communication.

dating to the period 650-750 CE as holding a palm-leaf in her upper right hand.[40] Having not seen this image it is not possible to verify this. Adding further weight to the identification of the figure in the plaque with Nīlalohita is the presence of a panel belonging to the same temple depicting a figure carrying a skull – a part of the Nīlalohita myth which precedes this episode, hence if this interpretation is correct, there is a logical sequence.

Alternatively, this figure could be an illustration of Śiva or Skanda having killed the buffalo demon Mahiṣa, instead of the goddess Mahiṣāsuramardinī. Bisschop also raises the possibility of such an identification for the Mansar sculptures. Both gods are described in the *Mahābhārata* as having slain Mahiṣa (3.221.52–66). Bisschop writes:

> Interestingly, in a passage excluded from the main text of the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* on philological grounds, Śiva is addressed with the words … 'Homage to You who offered (?) the head of Brahma, to You who killed the buffalo' (*Mahābhārata* 13 App.1 No. 7, l. 45).

The figure in the Ahichhatrā plaque, however, bears no resemblance to Skanda, and owing to his attributes and iconography we can be confident that he is a form of Śiva.

Bhikṣāṭanamūrti or Nīlalohita Holding a Begging Bowl

Both this plaque and the next were found together on the northwest corner of the upper platform (Fig. 11.29). This plaque depicts a two-armed male figure in motion (Fig. 11.30). His lower body holds a pose identical to that of the character tentatively identified as Nīlalohita in the previous panel. His right arm rests against his rotund belly, and the palm of his hand is open and facing upwards in the gesture of begging. In his raised left hand he holds a bowl, which once held balls (visible in Fig. 11.30) probably representing sweetmeats.

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[40] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 30.

11.29. A pair of terracotta plaques from Ahichhatrā ACI before restoration. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

The figure wears a sacred thread with bells hanging from it, a flat band tied tightly around his upper abdomen, a necklace, bracelets and anklets. Aside from this, he is naked with a rather stocky figure, short legs and arms. He has lost most of his head, with only his lips now well defined and unusually full. His body does not display the grace so often celebrated in Gupta and post-Gupta sculpture; however, it must be taken into account that much of the ornamentation, such as the jewellery, has become detached from the plaque and only the incised lines detailing where these articles were to be positioned have survived.

Agrawala identifies this figure as Bhikṣāṭanamūrti, or Śiva in his form as the wandering supreme mendicant who carries a skull as his begging bowl.[41] There are many versions of this story (for example in the *Vāmanapurāṇa* and the *Skandapurāṇa*), but the general outline is that Bhairava in fury cut off the fifth head of Brahmā, and as punishment for committing Brahminicide – the sin of sins – Brahmā's skull becomes glued to Bhairava's hand and he is forced to roam around as a naked mendicant using the skull as his begging bowl, until he has atoned for his sin.

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[41] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 65.

Interestingly, Bhikṣāṭanamūrti generally wears bells, as Pariahs did, to warn people of his approach.[42]

11.30. The terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā ACI. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

Taking into consideration both the context of this panel and the iconography itself, there is little reason to doubt Agrawala's proposal. The *Skandapurāṇa*, though, introduces another version of this myth, and if we are to believe that the previous plaque depicts the *gaṇa* Nīlalohita, then this version is more fitting. Bisschop describes the story in the *Skandapurāṇa* (5.43) where it is said that Nīlalohita cuts off the arrogant fifth head of Brahmā with the nail of his left thumb. In the same vein as

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[42] Doniger, *The Hindus*, p. 436.

the other story, he wanders about as a mendicant, carrying the skull in his hand until it is released at the place which subsequently became known as Mahākapāla (great skull).[43] As previously mentioned, this story precedes the myth of Nīlalohita slaying the buffalo demon, which would indicate a narrative sequence – although we do not know whether these two plaques were actually positioned next to one another.

Unidentified Figure

11.31. Terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā ACI. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44

This plaque was found alongside the Bhikṣāṭanamūrti or Nīlalohita panel[44] and was evidently moulded by the same *pustakāra(s)* (Fig. 11.31). It depicts a rotund male

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[43] Bisschop, 'The Skull on Śiva's Head', pp. 10-11.
[44] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 65.

figure, with stocky proportions, standing upright with his feet apart. His lips are unusually full even by Gupta standards. His eyes are almond-shaped and his eyebrows gently arched. He has a faintly incised moustache and fangs. The latter feature suggests that he is a Bhairava image.[45] His hair is curled and rests on his shoulders. Both of his arms are bent at the elbow parallel to his chest. His hands are missing and he holds no attributes by which to identify him. Around his neck a long and unusual scarf composed of 'gadrooned folds' is draped.[46] He wears a *dhotī* with very delicately incised lines. Unfortunately, due to the poor state of this plaque it is not possible to identify the deity with any confidence, although we can posit a guess that he represents Bhairava or Nīlalohita.

Śiva Gaṇas Destroying Dakṣa's Sacrifice (*Dakṣa-Yajña-Vidhaṁsa*)

This plaque, correctly identified by Agrawala as illustrating the *Dakṣa-Yajña-Vidhaṁsa* (Śiva *gaṇas* destroying Dakṣa's sacrifice), depicts nine figures surrounded by a checkered border (Figs. 11.32 and 11.33).[47] The first figure on the left hand side of the upper register wields a sword above his head (now lost) and holds a shield in his other left hand. Across his upper body he wears a *channavīra* ornament adorned with pearls.[48] A dagger is positioned in his ornate belt and he is clothed in a striped *dhotī*. Agrawala describes him as a *gaṇa*,[49] though *gaṇas* are usually depicted nude in the Ahichhatrā plaques and only wear the simplest of ornaments. He must therefore represent a deity, possibly Vīrabhadra, who is often depicted carrying a sword and shield and who plays a central role in the myth. The *gaṇa* beside him is naked except for a belt holding a dagger, a necklace and bracelets. His face has flaked away. With his left hand he pulls the beard of a figure next to him whom Agrawala describes as a *ṛṣi*, perhaps the officiating priest in the sacrifice wearing *valkala* (tree bark) and carrying a rosary in his left hand.[50] His face is now missing but can be seen in an ASI photograph (see Fig. 11.32).

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[45] In all likelihood a clay relief moustache and fangs would have originally been affixed to the image.

[46] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 65.

[47] Ibid., p. 64.

[48] Ibid., p. 64.

[49] Ibid., p. 64.

[50] Ibid., p. 64.

11.32. Terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā ACI depicting Śiva gaṇas destroying Dakṣa's sacrifice. The plaque measures 62 x 62 x 9 cm and is housed in the National Museum, New Delhi. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

He wears a slightly alarmed expression and sports matted hair neatly parted into thick strands falling onto his temples. Next to him is a figure wearing a crown, a striped *dhotī* and a sacred thread.[51] Agrawala describes him as holding a vase with his right hand, but this is difficult to make out. [52] The naked figure in the left hand corner of the lower register of the plaque sports a Śiva-like matted hairstyle tied at the crown of the head and cascading downwards (Fig. 11.34). His legs are shapeless and stumpy. He carries a raised axe (*paraśu*) in his right hand.[53] With his left hand he is either passing or receiving an unidentifiable article to or from the *gaṇa* above him. The axe and coiffure suggest that he is a Śaiva deity, probably Caṇḍeśa, who is described in the

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[51] Agrawala tentatively identifies this figure as Dakṣa, but the evidence is insufficient. Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 64.

[52] Ibid., p. 64.

[53] Ibid., p. 64.

Śivadharma as ‘the fierce lord of the troops of Gaṇas.’[54] Next to him is a nude *gaṇa* with his teeth bared and his eyes wide open in a fearsome fashion. He stares up at the deity in the far right of the panel. He holds a bowl – possibly a *kapāla* (skull) – in his right hand and with his left hand he grabs onto the belt of the figure in front of him who is attempting to make a getaway.

11.33. Terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā ACI in its current state. National Museum, New Delhi.

This deity is clothed in a striped *dhotī*, a crown and earrings. He appears to be holding a cobra in his left hand, which ordinarily might indicate that he is Śiva. However, because the deity is being attacked by a *gaṇa* this identification is implausible. Beside him stands a deity bedecked in jewels and wearing a *kirīṭa mukuṭa* (conical crown), who thus might represent Viṣṇu. Indeed, Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa in the Anantaśayana plaque from Bhitargaon wears a similar headdress. Alternatively, since this is the only figure

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[54] Bisschop, ‘Once Again on the Identity of Caṇḍeśvara’, p. 243.

wearing two necklaces, perhaps suggesting that he is the most important character portrayed in this scene, we might conjecture that this is a depiction of Śiva. Moreover, the cobra may belong to him.

11.34. Detail of the terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā ACI depicting Dakṣa's sacrifice.

The final figure in the plaque also wears a crown and holds a thunderbolt in his left hand. Agrawala identifies this deity as the king of the gods, Indra.[55] The attention to detail should also be noted here; the headdresses or hairstyles, the necklaces, bracelets, earrings and belts differ from figure to figure. Likewise the characters each hold a different pose. The composition is energetic, and does succeed to an extent in conveying the havoc and alarm caused by the angry *gaṇas* who are busy at work destroying the sacrifice hosted by Dakṣa.

Śiva *Gaṇas* Scrambling for Sweets

This panel was unearthed in poor condition but fortunately the subject is instantly recognisable. The composition depicts *gaṇas* stealing food from Dakṣa's sacrifice (Figs. 11.35 and 11.36).[56] The bodies of five stocky nude *gaṇas* with rotund bellies survive in various states of disrepair. One, rather charmingly, is shown on the verge of

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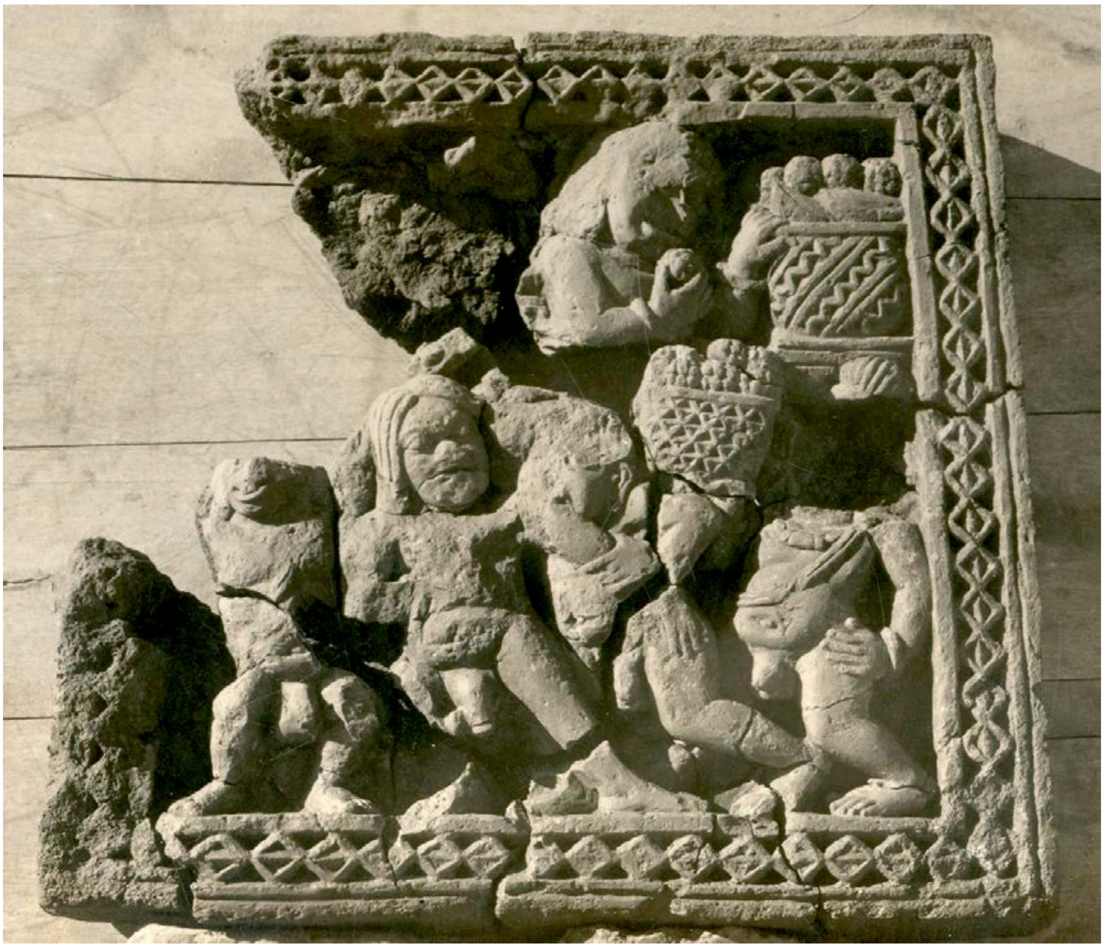
[55] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 64.

[56] This episode is told in 12.284 of the *Mahābhārata*.

biting into a sweet, demonstrating a delightful sense of humour on behalf of the artist. Two baskets of sweetmeats are depicted, each woven with a delicate design. According to Agrawala, even the sweets are recognisable as *motīchūr laḍḍus* and *guñjhiā*.[57]



11.35. Terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā ACI depicting gaṇas stealing food from Dakṣa's sacrifice. The plaque measures 64 x 64 cm and is on display in the National Museum, New Delhi. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

The myth of Dakṣa's sacrifice is told in numerous texts, and is of special significance for the Pāśupatas who potentially worshipped at Ahichhatrā, and yet it is a subject rarely found on temples. The Ahichhatrā panels may be the earliest extant images of the actual destruction of the sacrifice and indeed, to the best of my knowledge, only one other Gupta image believed to illustrate a scene from the

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[57] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 64.

aftermath of Dakṣa's sacrifice survives in the shape of a relief panel on the *toraṇa* crossbar from Nagari.[58]

11.36. Fragments from the terracotta plaque depicting gaṇas stealing food from Dakṣa's sacrifice photographed following excavation. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological survey of India, 1940-44.

As D. C. Sircar describes, the precursor to the myth of Dakṣa's sacrifice is contained in the *Ṛgveda* and features in some of the *Brāhmaṇas*.[59] Here Prajāpati (Dakṣa), who is connected with sacrifice, becomes involved in an incestuous relationship with his daughter Dyauṣ. The gods, angered by their father's behaviour, ask Rudra to pierce Prajāpati with an arrow.[60] The *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* (II. 1), tells the story in which Prajāpati performs a sacrifice without inviting Rudra, who then seizes the sacrifice.[61] Sircar describes the myth as evolving further sometime before the

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[58] Many thanks to Hans Bakker for sharing photographs of this piece with me.

[59] Sircar notes that the earliest versions of this myth are told in the *Ṛgveda*, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (*Madhyandina* version) I, vii, 4, 1-8; cf. II, I, 2, 9; *Kanva* version, II, vii, 2, 1-8; I, I, 2, 5-6; and the *Aitreya Brahmana* III, 33-34. See D. C. Sircar, *The Sakta Pithas* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004, 1st edn 1973), p. 5.

[60] Ibid., p. 5.

[61] Ibid., p. 5.

Gupta period. This version is found in the *Mahābhārata* (12.28, 2-3), in several *Purāṇas* and in Kalidasa's *Kumārasaṃbhava* (1.21).[62] The story told in the *Mahābhārata* describes how Dakṣa began to perform a sacrifice in the company of all the gods except for Śiva who was excluded. Śiva's consort Umā was upset by this slight to her husband and assumed the form of the terrifying goddess Mahākālī, while Śiva created Vīrabhadra from his mouth. With their band of *gaṇas*, they destroyed the sacrifice. During the destruction, the *gaṇas* consumed the vast array of eatables available. Meanwhile, in the midst of all the bloodshed, Brahmā entreated Śiva to stop the destruction, promising him a share of all future sacrificial offerings.[63] While the goddess does not feature in the panels from the Ahichhatrā monument, it is probable that Vīrabhadra does. In the long *stotra* (hymn) that follows, in praise of the one thousand and eight names of Śiva, Bakker singles out a verse:

> Long ago, O Dakṣa, the Pāśupata *Yoga* was created by me; that (*yoga*) is the eminent, proper reward of practising that (*vrata*), and that (*yoga*) shall be yours, O blessed one. Throw off the (fever) of your soul! (MBh 13.17.18)[64]

Here, Bakker writes: 'Mahādeva instructs/ initiates Dakṣa in the Pāśupata observance; this is the boon that will lead him eventually to the end of suffering … The Pāśupata *yoga* or union with God.' This is important for irrefutably connecting the myth of Dakṣa's sacrifice with Pāśupata Śaivism. Bakker also proposes that this particular verse is illustrated in the Nagari crossbar.[65] The other scenes on the *toraṇa* are described by Joanna Williams and probably include Nara and Nārāyaṇa; Arjuna and Śiva disguised as a hunter (*kirāta*); Arjuna performing a penance by standing on one leg; Arjuna 'confronting' a boar with Śiva and Pārvatī; Arjuna and the *kirāta* drawing arrows against each other; and a scene showing Arjuna hitting the hunter with his bow after using all of his arrows. The reverse of the crossbar includes a scene depicting

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[62] Ibid., p. 5. The myth is found in the *Brahma Purāṇa* 39, the *Matsya Purāṇa* 12, the *Padma, Sristikhanda* 5, and the *Kurma Purāṇa* I.15.

[63] *Mahābhārata* 12.284.

[64] Hans Bakker, 'At the Right Side of the Teacher: Imagination, Imagery, and Image in Vedic and Śaiva Initiation', in *Images in Asian Religions: Texts and Contexts*, ed. by Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2004), pp. 117-148 (p. 133).

[65] Ibid., p. 133.

Lakulīśa with four disciples.[66] Bakker reaches the conclusion that the theme of the *toraṇa* is the acquisition of Pāśupata benefits.[67]

In this myth, as in many others, Śiva reveals his supremacy over the other gods, thus making this an important story for the Pāśupatas or for Śaivas who were living somewhat outside of the Vedas. Wendy Doniger writes:

> [It] is in part a historical narrative of what did happen in the history of Hinduism: Śiva was not part of the Vedic sacrifice, and then he became part of the Hindu sacrifice. The gods, particularly Dakṣa … exclude Śiva from their sacrifice because Śiva is the outsider, the Other, the god to whom Vedic sacrifice is not offered … The myth of Dakṣa's sacrifice verifies Śiva's otherness, but modifies it so that Śiva is in fact given a share in some sacrifices, still not part of the Vedic world but the supreme god of the post-Vedic world, at least in the eyes of the Śaivas who tell this myth.'[68]

The myth of Dakṣa helps to legitimise the Pāśupata order and, possibly, popular lay Śaivism of which we know little. In light of this, it seems an obvious choice for the iconographic scheme at Bhimgaja.

Sage Nārāyaṇa?

Only the upper right hand corner of the plaque survives (Fig. 11.37). It portrays a four-armed seated male figure accompanied by a considerably smaller female and a standing male; only the upper bodies of the latter two are extant. The faces of the three characters are somewhat square in shape, remarkably reminiscent in fact of the sculpture of the Kuṣāṇa period. The left leg of the four-armed deity is lost, but it is likely that he was seated on a bench in *lalitāsana*. His matted dreadlocks are worn in a topknot (*jaṭāmukuṭa*) out of the centre of which several locks cascade fountain-like down the left side of his head. Across his chest he wears a strap that has the appearance of animal hide rather than the usual sacred thread. He wears a short coarse looking *dhotī*, probably intended to represent tree bark. His lower left arm is bent at the elbow with his hand resting upon his thigh. In the palm of his upper left hand he

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[66] Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, p. 142.

[67] Bakker, 'At the Right Side of the Teacher', p. 133.

[68] Doniger, *The Hindus*, p. 260.

balances a pot with foliage (*amṛta ghaṭa*). Only a couple of fingers survive from his lower right hand which is held against his abdomen.

11.37. Terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā ACI. The panel measures 65 x 73 x 9 cm and is on display at the National Museum, New Delhi

In his raised upper hand he holds a fragmented rosary, above which is a flower, its head facing towards the deity. Next to the deity is a small female figure with her hands pressed together in *añjalimudrā* (a gesture of obeisance). She wears several bangles on each of her lower arms, and large hooped earrings. Her hair is worn in an elaborate plaited style, which, as James Harle points out, recalls the Gangā sculpture from Bhimgaja.[69] Agrawala's drawing of the plaque shows the no-longer extant thighs of the female figure (see Fig. 11.38). She appears to be standing naked, but for jewellery and a shawl draped around her shoulders. Behind the female figure stands a man with tightly curled hair, head bowed and eyes facing towards the earth. He wears a sacred thread and holds his left hand palm upwards, facing the deity. His thumb and little finger appear to be touching. His right hand is closed and held below his eye.

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[69] Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, p. 31.

11.38. Drawing after Agrawala's 1948 drawing of the plaque. The thighs of the female figure are no-longer extant.[70]

The attributes and appearance of the four-armed deity initially point to this being a depiction of a yogic form of Śiva. This interpretation is further reinforced by the overwhelmingly Śaiva context of the temple. Indeed, Agrawala describes this plaque as representing Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti, the "Lord who faces South";[71] a form of Śiva as the divine teacher who is generally depicted seated beneath a Banyan tree, known as the tree of knowledge.[72] Both Harle and Shrimali accept Agrawala's interpretation,

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[70] See Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 65.

[71] Ibid., p. 66.

[72] Kramrisch, *The Presence of Siva*, p. 57.

and while Hans Bakker has questioned the identity of this plaque *en passant*,[73] to the best of my knowledge, an alternative reading of the panel has never been presented.

Agrawala has identified the female figure as a representation of Pārvatī, described in the *Kumārasaṃbhava* of Kālidāsa as waiting upon Śiva for a long period of time while he sat in meditation.[74] Her nudity, however, sits uncomfortably with this interpretation. While Pārvatī is usually depicted naked on her upper half, she is always clothed to a greater or lesser extent from her waist down. Moreover female nudity is uncommon in Gupta and post-Gupta art as a whole, being more a feature of Śuṅga and Kuṣāṇa sculpture.

The identification of this character as Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti is called into question for the following reasons: firstly, as already mentioned, Dakṣiṇāmūrti is usually depicted seated beneath a Banyan tree. Secondly, perhaps to make room for other important figures, this deity is situated in the top right hand corner of the plaque. Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti though, would undoubtedly be the principle figure in a composition and thus should occupy either the centre or the left hand side of the panel. Moreover, he would be flanked by *ṛṣis* (sages or seers). Most tellingly, though, is the presence of the naked female figure, upon whom the deity fixes his eyes. She has no place in an image of Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti. Indeed, the combination of her beauty and nudity suggests that she represents a heavenly nymph (*apsarā*).[75]

The only myth familiar to me that involves both Śiva and a nymph, is that of Tilottamā described in the *Ādiparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* (1.203) and recounted in an earlier chapter. In short, the alluring Tilottamā circumambulated Śiva and as a result of his desire to watch her as she encircled him he became four headed.[76] The deity in the Ahichhatrā plaque, however, only has one head, and moreover, what part would the standing male figure play in this myth?

Perhaps the deity is not Śiva after all, but who then would fit the role of a four-armed ascetic? Based on a comparison of this plaque with a depiction of the Sages

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[73] Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, p. 31; Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 127; Bakker, 'Monuments to the Dead', p. 25.

[74] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 66.

[75] For an in-depth discussion on Śiva Daksiṇāmūrtī and the complexities surrounding his visual manifestations see Bakker, 'On the Right Side of the Teacher', pp. 117-148.

[76] Bisschop, 'Śiva', pp. 746-747.

Nara and Nārāyaṇa (part incarnations of Viṣṇu) on the east face of the Gupta period temple at Deogaṛh, the conclusion reached here is that the figure in the Ahichhatrā plaque previously thought to be an image of Śiva is more likely to represent Sage Nārāyaṇa. Since only part of the panel has survived we can posit a guess that Nara may have been seated to the right of Nārāyaṇa, as on the panel *in situ* on the *śikhara* of the temple at Bhītargāon. Absent from the Deogaṛh scene is the presence of a heavenly nymph standing before the sages, which brings us back to the identity of the nude female in the Ahichhatrā plaque.

The terracotta plaque from Bhītargāon is the only other relief panel surviving from the Gupta period to depict Nara and Nārāyaṇa in the company of *apsarās*. As discussed in a previous chapter, the nymph standing on Nārāyaṇa's lap is likely to be a representation of the heavenly *apsarā* Urvaśī. Thus the scene unfolding here must be that of the myth told in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* (I.I29, 1-19 and III.35, 1-18), describing how Sage Nārāyaṇa came to create the beautiful *apsarā* Urvaśī by drawing her outline in mango juice on his thigh.

The same identification is proposed here for the Ahichhatrā plaque; and hence the nude female figure is most probably a representation of the lovely Urvaśī. It is apposite then that Sage Nārāyaṇa has been depicted with his left hand on his thigh, perhaps illustrating that the creation of Urvaśī has just taken place. As in the plaque from Bhītargāon, several more *apsarās* may have been portrayed in the lower register of the panel. The association of this narrative relief with the myth telling of the attempted seduction of Nara and Nārāyaṇa is strengthened by the subject matter of second plaque from Bhimgaja, which, based on style and border design, was paired with the former plaque. It depicts an *apsarā* or *kinnarī* (in this instance a celestial centauress) with a princely lover on her back. These are the only two plaques to survive from Bhimgaja depicting heavenly nymphs.

Returning to the former plaque, the foliage-filled pot held by the deity is highly unusual; one would expect Sage Nārāyaṇa to hold a water bottle symbolic of an ascetic, and indeed this is the case in the Deogaṛh relief. This detail may or may not hold significance. For example, in the Gupta period the river goddesses are often depicted holding water pots, and occasionally, as in a charming example of a terracotta plaque depicting Gangā held in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin, the pot is shown overflowing with foliage.[77] To take an educated though speculative guess, the pot held by Sage Nārāyaṇa may signify his creative potential, or rather his ability to create. It should be mentioned that this is only one of many oddities present in the plaques from Bhimgaja. The male figure standing to the right of the plaque is probably an ascetic, perhaps a pupil of the great sages. As mentioned above, similar figures stand behind Nara and Nārāyaṇa in the Deogaṛh panel.

Lastly, on the basis of the surviving depictions of the two sages, it can be suggested here that this might be the earliest extant image of Nara and Nārāyaṇa.[78]

A *Kinnarī* and her Lover

This panel survives in its entirety and depicts a *kinnarī* (a divine composite-creature with a human head and torso and the lower body of an animal or bird, in this case a horse) (Fig. 11.39). A male figure of smaller proportions is seated on her back. In the upper right hand corner of the plaque flies a *vidyādhara* (celestial being) carrying a garland. A tree with drooping branches and mountainous or hilly terrain has been depicted in the lower register. The squarish face of the *kinnarī* is strikingly like that of the female tentatively identified as an *apsarā* in the previous panel. She also wears large hooped-earrings and has a similar though considerably more elaborate hairstyle in a trefoil arrangement. No doubt this gorgeous coiffure replete with pearls or beads and a lotus flower is supposed to indicate her extraordinary beauty. She holds her right hand up in the *tripatāka* gesture while she places her left hand affectionately over the left shoulder of the male rider.[79] Her breasts are bare though her *décolletage* is adorned with an *ekāvalī* necklace (single strand of pearls) and a long scarf that flutters in the wind behind her. Oddly, above her pearl necklace is what at first glance appears to be another necklace until one notices the rope hanging from its centre. Is it then a chain or a lasso? On the lower half of her body sits a saddle (*paryāṇapaṭṭa*)

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[77] An image of this relief fragment is published in *From Indian Earth*, p. 165.

[78] In the *Mahābhārata* 1.19, Nara and Nārāyaṇa participate in the churning of the ocean of milk episode. As explored in Chapter 10, this myth is illustrated in two surviving fragmentary lintel depictions dating to the early Gupta period located at Pawāyā and Udayagiri, both in Madhya Pradesh. The relief depictions, however, are considerably worn. The characters depicted in the Udayagiri lintel cannot be distinguished, while Nara and Nārāyaṇa are not identifiable in what remains of the Pawāyā scene. For a reproduction of the Pawāyā lintel see Okada and Zéphir, p. 262; for a reproduction of the Udayagiri lintel see Fig. 10.26.

[79] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 66.

with a tassel dangling from its hem. Running under her tail is a band (*kakṣyābandha*) with a zigzag design and an ornate medallion at the centre (*chakraka*).[80]

11.39. Terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā ACI, measuring 64 x 64 x 9 cm. National Museum, New Delhi.

Curiously, the *kinnarī* has two hind legs but no front legs. Her tail and hoofs have been beautifully executed. Her male companion tenderly caresses her chin with his right hand. He is bedecked in finery including a crown, earrings and, across his chest, a *channavīra* ornament with an embossed disc at the centre. He holds a bow in his left hand and is clothed in a striped *dhotī*. In sharp contrast to the ill-proportioned limbs of the figures in the Nīlalohita/ Bhikṣāṭanamūrti plaques, the foot and lower leg of the man have been finely and naturalistically modelled. The foot even has a delicate arch. The scarf of the *kinnarī* blows against his chest and flaps behind him in a delightful attempt to convey a sense of movement.

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[80] Ibid., p. 66.

About this plaque, Agrawala writes:

> The kinnara-mithuna was a popular motif in the time of Bāṇabhaṭṭa, who refers to it as being pursued by prince Chandrapida and then disappearing on a hill-top (*achala-tunga-sikharam=aruhora*). It is stated that Śiva as Dakṣiṇāmūrti should be the object of special adoration by kinnaras, devas and others. This plaque may, therefore, have been juxtaposed with … [the Dakṣiṇāmūrti plaque], in the frieze of the temple.[81]

Mythical *kinnaras* feature in Bāṇabhaṭṭa's seventh century play *Kādambarī*.[82] The story narrates that while out hunting on his horse, prince Candrāpiḍa spies a pair of *kinnaras* in a forest. He desires to capture them but as he approaches they flee.[83] He follows, chasing them for miles until they disappear over the top of a mountain. Aside from its later date, other aspects of the play assure us that this is not the story depicted in our plaque. Not once does Candrāpiḍa alight upon a *kinnarī*, nor does he have any romance with one - the object of his affections being *Kādambarī*.

Agrawala believes the plaque to be depicting a fleeting reference in the *Rāmāyaṇa* to a *kinnara-dvandva* (a *kinnara* couple) frolicking on the hillside.[84] This theory is also supported by Shrimali.[85] The text at the National Museum in New Delhi, on the other hand, describes the plaque as depicting King Vikrama (Purūravas) with his lover, the celestial nymph Urvaśī. This interpretation initially appears to be plausible, in part because the myth of Urvaśī and Purūravas was popular in early India, and certainly so during the Gupta period. Secondly, aside from the chain, it appears to be a loving scene between an exquisitely beautiful celestial being and a regal or god-like figure; and lastly, it would tie in with the theme of the previous plaque with which this one is paired. Incidentally, two further terracottas depicting *kinnara-mithuna* were found at Ahichhatrā. Images of these have never been published and their whereabouts are unknown, but Agrawala briefly describes them. The first is a simple disc produced from a single mould showing a *kinnara* pair. This was found at ACVII

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[81] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 66.

[82] A *Kinnara* is a male centaur, while *Kinnaras* can mean a male and female pair, or a male pair.

[83] *The Kādambarī of Bāṇa*, trans. by C. M. Ridding (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1896), pp. 90-91.

[84] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 59; Kinnaras are mentioned in passing frequently in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, along with *gandharvas* and other celestials.

[85] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 129.

to the west of the fortress.[86] The second plaque, which comes from ACIII, has a flat base (possibly free-standing) and bears relief depictions on both faces.[87] This is badly-damaged but portrays, on each face, a centauress with a rider. The riders are missing but Agrawala asserts that anklets were worn. Based on this detail, Agrawala has identified the riders as female. If Agrawala is correct it would certainly call into question the identity of the couple in the ACI plaque; however, a number of the male figures in the plaques from Bhimgaja wear anklets and we can be relatively confident that such is the situation here. Agrawala likens this plaque to a Kuṣāṇa period red-sandstone depiction from the Jamalpur Mound, Mathurā (Fig. 11.40).[88]

11.40. Kuṣāṇa period stone relief carving of a centauress with a male rider from Jamalpur Mound, Mathurā. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

The slab is carved on each face with a composition remarkably close – though less ornate – to that of the Ahichhatrā plaque, indicating that the artist at Ahichhatrā was following an iconographic model already established by or during the Kuṣāṇa period.[89] The heads of the relief figures on both sides are lost which suggests that they may have been deliberately defaced at some point. On both faces a male figure is

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[86] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 58.

[87] Ibid., p. 58. Agrawala dates this plaque to 550-650 CE, however, it could be earlier.

[88] Ibid., p. 58.

[89] This sandstone fragment is housed in the Government Museum, Mathurā.

portrayed seated on the back of a *kinnarī* who has a nude torso. As in the Ahichhatrā relief, she wears a *kakṣyābandha* with a medallion at the centre, located horizontally across her lower body. She also wears a curious large band around her neck which she takes hold of with her right hand, as though trying to detach it. Moreover, the male figure is holding a damaged article in his right hand, which looks rather knife-like. The *kinnarī* is galloping across a mountainous terrain and, as with the Ahichhatrā depiction, her upper body is twisted awkwardly towards the male figure. Again, movement has been expressed through a shawl flying backwards.

Agrawala also informs us that, aside from at Mathurā and Ahichhatrā, images of *kinnara-mithuna* were found at Sāñcī, Bādāmi and at Rājghāṭ.[90] Moreover, a Gupta period terracotta moulded-disc from Lakha-Dhora near Raṅgamahal in Rajasthan depicts a loving *kinnara-mithuna* scene on one face, while the reverse is ornamental. The disc portrays a centauress with her male companion seated on her back. In this instance a male devotee with his hands held together in *anjalimudrā* joins the couple, suggesting that this is an auspicious scene.[91] It should be noted here that it is rather peculiar that a nameless *kinnara-mithuna* would be the object of worship. Likewise, K. N. Sastri highlights the irregularity of the presence of the garland-bearing *vidyādhara* in the Ahichhatrā plaque.[92] Both of these examples suggest that these characters were not merely emblematic, but were named divinities recognisable to people at the time of their making.

Let us now turn to the Urvaśī and Purūravas/ Vikrama theory that has been proposed for the Ahichhatrā panel. A dialogue of eighteen verses in the *Ṛgveda* (10. 95. 1-18) is the first recorded version of the Purūravas-Urvaśī myth, but as Barbara Stoler Miller writes:

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[90] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 59. Although not directly related, it is worth drawing attention here to a rather unusual Gupta period plaque from Nachar Khera. Regrettably only a fragment of this fascinating panel – housed in the Gurukul Museum in Jhajjar – has survived. It depicts a six-armed male figure seated on a bench or possibly on a chariot. In one of his right hands he holds a sword. Beneath him is a centaur either galloping or in flight. The arms of the centaur are folded across his chest and his now fragmented head is thrown backwards. Curiously, behind, or possibly out of his right shoulder emerges the head of a goose or peacock. Lastly, the remnants of a human figure can be seen seated on the back of the centaur. Though the figure is severely eroded, it might be suggested that the back of the figure is facing towards us, while the head is resting on the lap of the six-armed male. The Gurukul Museum believes the six-armed figure to be a depiction of the demon Triśira, but this is rather speculative and more research is needed to understand the scene that is taking place in this plaque (see Devakarni, Plate 3). I am grateful to Donald Stadtner for sending me the image of this plaque.

[91] See Urmila Sant, *Terracotta Art of Rajasthan* (Delhi: Aryan Books International, 1997), p. 179.

[92] Cited in Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 129.

> The Vedic hymn presupposes a floating body of stories about the pair, suggested by scattered references elsewhere in the Veda, and by the hymn's own vagueness: the author appears to have written a dialogue epitomizing events with which he assumes his audience to be familiar.[93]

The obscure conversation in the *Ṛgveda* takes place between the mighty but mortal king Purūravas – who we are informed was nurtured from birth by the gods so that he would later fight the *dasyus* (enemies) – and the celestial water nymph Urvaśī who has been married to the king for four years. The story is a sad one, Urvaśī having abandoned her husband because he has not kept to certain conditions. The narrative consists of his desperate pleas for her to stay, and Urvaśī's persistent refusal. During their conversation she recalls how they used to make love three times daily although reluctantly on her part. In addition, we are told that eating only a drop of ghee a day satisfied her hunger. Urvaśī reveals that she is pregnant (or has already had a son) and agrees to send Purūravas the child. Finally she promises that after his death he will rejoice (with her?) in heaven. Lightning and the bleating of lambs are mentioned, and both feature centrally in later variations of the myth. The story is further developed in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (11. 5. 1. 1-17). Here, Urvaśī is said to adore Purūravas and allows him to make love to her three times daily but never against her will. She sets further conditions for their marriage including that he must never let her see his nudity. They live happily together and have a child; however, the *gandharvas* selfishly long for her to return to the heavens and so they formulate a plan; they steal the beloved lambs (who Urvaśī calls her sons) from her bedside and Purūravas wishing to prove his manliness leaps out of bed in a bid to rescue them. At the same time the *gandharvas* send a flash of lightning and Urvaśī sees her husband naked. Immediately she leaves him. Some time later Purūravas comes across her bathing in a lake with her companions, and begs her to return. Urvaśī promises to spend one night with the king. In an unexpected twist of fate, the following morning the *gandharvas* offer Purūravas a boon; he asks to become one of them. They give him a fire with which to perform a sacrifice, which he unwisely leaves in a forest. When he returns two trees have grown in place of the sacrificial fire. Fortunately, he is then instructed to make fire with the two different types of wood from the trees, after which he himself morphs into a *gandharva.*

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[93] Barbara Stoler Miller*, Theatre of Memory: The Plays of Kālidāsa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 348.

Variations of the myth are also found in the *Baudhāyana-Śrautasūtra*, *Mahābhārata*, *Matsya Purāṇa*, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, *Harivaṃśa* and elsewhere. During the Gupta period, Kālidāsa adapted the story for a play entitled *Vikramōrvaśīyam*. Briefly, Kālidāsa's version of the story unfolds as follows.[94] King Vikrama (Purūravas in other texts) rescues the celestial nymph Urvaśī from the clutches of the demon Keśin and they fall in love. At one point the king muses about how impossible it seems that an old sage (Nārāyaṇa) could have created such an astounding beauty.[95] Indra allows her to marry him on one condition: that she must return to the celestial realms once Vikrama sees the face of their first child. Despite a few misadventures, the couple live happily for many years until their son Āyus, whom Urvaśī had hidden away in a hermitage in order to prolong her marriage, is bought to Vikrama (notably Āyus is a forefather of the Kurus and Pāṇḍavas). When Vikrama sees the face of Āyus, Urvaśī laments that she must return to the heavens. Happily, at that moment Sage Nārada arrives with a message from Indra and announces that Urvaśī may remain with Vikrama until his death.[96]

Interestingly, neither the *purāṇas* nor the *Vikramōrvaśīyam* describe Urvaśī as equine, or part equine. In both the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and the *Ṛgveda*, Urvaśī is a water nymph (possibly a bird); however, the *Ṛgveda* also alludes to her being horse-like, but whether these musings are metaphorical or not is unclear. Purūravas, for instance, 'says that immortal women who shy away from mortal men are like horses grazed by a chariot' (10. 95. 8).[97] Moreover, 'he also says that Urvaśī is as hard to catch as a winning racehorse (10. 95. 3), and Urvaśī admits that immortal women, when they respond to a mortal's caresses, are like water birds or like horses who bite

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[94] *Vikrama and Urvasi, or the Hero and the Nymph*, trans. by Harold Hayman Wilson (Calcutta: V. Holcroft, 1826), pp. 14-104.

[95] Ibid., p. 20.

[96] The version in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* for the most part is quite close to the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*; after the couple fall in love, Urvaśī outlines three conditions for their marriage. Firstly, he must protect her two rams whom she loves as children; secondly, he must not let her see him naked; and lastly, he must feed her only clarified butter. Their marriage is a happy one until the celestial *gandharvas* begin to resent the absence of their friend, and arrange to have Urvaśī's rams stolen in the night. Misfortune occurs when as Purūravas leaps out of bed to try and save the animals, the *gandharvas* illuminate the sky with lightning and Urvaśī sees the naked form of her husband. She instantly returns to the celestial realms. After a number of years apart, the continued devotion of Purūravas for his wife is rewarded with a boon. He is to perform a fire sacrifice after which he is able to join Urvaśī in the heavens. See *The Viṣṇu Purāṇa,* trans. by Horace Hayman Wilson, (London: Trübner, 1840), pp. 394-397.

[97] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 181.

in their love play (10. 95. 9)…'[98] Doniger takes this to mean that Urvaśī is equine.[99] Interestingly according to J. C. Wright, Purūravas is described as a bird in the *Ṛgveda* and has the ability to fly, while Urvaśī walks and is 'described as constantly subject to metamorphosis (*vīrūpā*).'[100] Wright further suggests that Kālidāsa 'completes the humanisation of Purūravas.'[101] If, however, the Ahichhatrā plaque is a visual manifestation of the Urvaśī Purūravas myth then the heroic ruler was already depicted with human form by around the second century CE, long before the *Vikramōrvaśīyam* was composed.

The inexplicit nature of the textual sources in relation to Urvaśī's appearance, aside from her being unequivocally beautiful, raises questions about whether the centauress in the Ahichhatrā plaque is in actuality a representation of the celestial nymph or not. We must take into account that the oral telling of myths would have sometimes deviated or at least differed from the narratives recorded in the texts. This brings us to question whether the sources used by artists were always textual ones. Arguing along the same lines, though on a separate topic, Mann writes about his approach to the study of the early history of Kārttikeya:

> The two sources, textual and material, often appear to narrate differing characterizations of Kārttikeya, and we need to appreciate that the perspective of these sources and the stories they attempt to narrate differ, at times considerably. While we might hope that these various sources will help us uncover 'the' story of Skanda, they instead demonstrate that there were several competing versions of the deity during the period of study examined here.[102]

On the other hand, the celestial nymphs depicted in the Nara Nārāyaṇa plaque at Bhītargāon have a human form as does the fragmented nymph in the Nara Nārāyaṇa plaque from Bhimgaja.

An episode in the *Harivaṃśa* (8),[103] tells the complicated tale of the union, separation and reunion of Vivasvant or Sūrya (the grandson of Dakṣa), and his

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[98] Ibid., p. 181.

[99] Doniger, *The Hindus*, p. 230.

[100] J. C. Wright, 'Purūravas and Urvaśī', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,* 30 (1967), pp. 526-547 (p. 528).

[101] Ibid., p. 528.

[102] Mann, p. 3.

[103] The *Harivaṃśa* is believed to date between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE.

consort Saṃjñā, daughter of Tvaṣṭṛ.[104] The synopsis of the story is as follows: owing to his extraordinary fiery energy, Vivasvant was born without limbs and was dark in colour. After giving birth to three children (Manu Vaivāsvata, Yama and Yamunā), Saṃjñā could no longer endure Vivasvant's unattractive form. Her solution was to create an exact – though mortal – replica of herself from her shadow to take her place in the household; this replica was called Savarnā. Meanwhile Saṃjñā disguised herself by taking the form of a mare. Vivasvant, believing that Savarnā was his wife, had a child with her called Manu, whom Savarnā showed favouritism towards. The older children were unhappy with the situation and confronted Savarnā. She then cursed Yama that he would lose a foot, and in retaliation, her 'husband' Vivasvant threatened to curse her. With the hope of avoiding this curse, Savarnā confessed to the deception. Full of anger, Vivasvant visited his father-in-law, Tvaṣṭṛ. The latter told Vivasvant that Saṃjñā had not been able to bear his appearance but had remained faithful to him. Tvaṣṭṛ proceeded to make Vivasvant handsome by removing his excessive fiery energy. The sun god then approached his wife disguised as a stallion. She rejected his advances[105], but turned her head towards him.[106] Interestingly, the turned head is one of the most salient features of each of the centauress/male plaques I have seen. When Vivasvant revealed his true, and much improved godly form, Saṃjñā was overjoyed and the story ends happily.

One of the most significant aspects of this myth is that it describes the birth of Manu, the progenitor of mankind. In the *Harivaṃśa*, it is the second Manu who is described as our ancestor, or in other words, the replica son of the replica wife, or the mortal son of the mortal wife.[107]

Many variations on this myth are told, for example, in the *Ṛgveda* 10.17.1-2,[108] in which Vivasvant's wife is not described as morphing into a mare, but does give birth

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[104] I am very grateful to Simon Brodbeck for drawing my attention to this myth.

[105] During this episode, Saṃjñā, against her will swallows some of her husband's semen (while he is still disguised as a stallion). She blows the semen out of her nostrils and the Aśvin twins were born.

[106] Wendy Doniger, 'Saraṇyū / Saṃjñā, The Sun and the Shadow', in *Devī, Goddesses of India*, ed. by John S. Hawley and Donna M. Wulff (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 155-172 (p. 161).

[107] Ibid., p. 161.

[108] Doniger refers to the following version of the *Ṛgveda*: *Rig Veda*, with the commentary of Sāyaṇa, 6 vols. (Benares: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series no.99, 1966).

to equine sons, the Aśvins; and in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* 103-105,[109] which is close to the earlier *Harivaṃśa* version, but differs in certain aspects, for instance, Saṃjñā abandons Vivasvant, not because of his ugliness, but because she cannot bear his fiery splendour or his anger.[110]

If it is this myth illustrated in the panel from Ahichhatrā ACI, then it might be proposed that it portrays the moment when Vivasvant, after trying to force himself on his unwilling wife (who turns her head awkwardly towards him), suddenly reveals his true identity, much to the delight of Saṃjñā. The climax of the tale, when Vivasvant essentially moves from being a temporary aggressor (in his stallion guise), to being the handsome and much-loved husband (in his godly form), might tentatively explain the apparent discordance in the panel between the joy and tenderness conveyed by both characters, and the heavy chain around the neck of the centuress, suggestive of capture.

Unfortunately, it is not possible at this stage to reach a firm conclusion about the identity of the figures in the Ahichhatrā plaque. We can, however, summarise the various arguments:

1) Firstly, there is a slim possibility that this image is an auspicious subject popular in early India and not illustrating a specific myth. In this instance, such an image would play a role similar to that of the nameless *mithuna* couples with human form. Moreover, it may indeed illustrate a passing reference in the *Rāmāyaṇa* to a *kinnara-mithuna*, as Agrawala asserts. The male figure, though, is definitely not a *kinnara* - and moreover, the presence of the *vidyādhara* calls Agrawala's interpretation into question since the latter character raises the importance of these figures beyond being simply emblematic.

2) Arguments in support of the Urvaśī and Purūravas interpretation are as follows: the panel depicts a celestial being and a royal personage or *deva*; this couple appear to be in love. The unusually elaborate coiffure and jewellery of the *kinnarī* indicates that we are supposed to think of this creature as especially beautiful, as we know Urvaśī is. The male figure carries a bow, and textual sources emphasise that Purūravas was a

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[109] Doniger refers to the following version of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*: *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (Bombay: Biblioteca Indica, 1890).

[110] Doniger, 'Saraṇyū', p. 163.

great warrior. We know that this myth was popular during the Gupta period because Kālidāsa adapted it for a play, although by this point in time, the popularity of the myth seems to have been well-established if we are to judge by the number of references there are to it in early texts. Moreover, aside from the Vivasvant and Saṃjñā tale, I am not aware of another early Hindu myth describing a *kinnarī* and a human, or divine lover, although one of the most popular Buddhist *jātakas* (tales) from the *Divyāvadāna* (also found in other Buddhist texts) tells of the rescue of the *kinnarī* Manoharā by prince Sudhanu.[111] In this story though, the *kinnarī* is explicitly described as half-bird. Lastly, if the figure in the previous panel from ACI is indeed Sage Nārāyaṇa, then identifying the *kinnarī* as Urvaśī is tempting, although not necessarily accurate. The arguments against this attribution are equally as compelling. Most importantly, the texts do not conclusively describe Urvaśī as half-woman, half-horse, although we do know that she is capable of metamorphosis. Likewise, to the best of my knowledge, the texts do not describe a moment when Urvaśī carries Purūravas on her back – indeed in some versions of the story, such as in the *Vikramōrvaśīyam*, Purūravas rescues a fainting Urvaśī and carries her away in his chariot. Lastly, there is the curious matter of the chain or lasso which the *kinnarī* appears to wear around her neck in both the Ahichhatrā plaque and in the sandstone relief from Mathurā. Indeed, the latter might well be portraying a captured *kinnarī*, while the former is even more confusing. The scene in the panel from ACI is evidently an affectionate one, thus the chain suggests that the *kinnarī* has been rescued by the princely or godly figure on her back, after the model of the *jātaka* from the *Divyāvadāna*. The presence of the chain certainly suggests that this plaque represents a specific myth rather than simply a frolicking *kinnara-mithuna* as Agrawala and Shrimali would have us believe.

4) Lastly, we come to the tale of Vivasvant and Saṃjñā - a myth describing the turbulent marriage of the couple, and the births of their children. The iconography of the plaque arguably fits more easily with this myth, than with the Urvaśī Purūravas tale, largely because Saṃjñā does transform herself into a mare – although, the myth does not describe her as having a human upper body. Though perhaps a rather far-fetched hypothesis, Saṃjñā could be in the process of transforming back into her

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[111] Padmanabh S. Jaini, *Collected Papers on Buddhist Studies* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001), p. 297 and p. 299.

original form. Alternatively, she could be depicted as half-goddess, half-mare in order to identify her clearly as the goddess Saṃjñā rather than just as a regular horse. Significantly, as described earlier in the chapter, Sūrya (Vivasvant) is represented in several fragmentary plaques at Ahichhatrā, and was evidently popular in the ancient city. As compelling as this identification might seem, however, there are some articles represented in the plaque that are not described in the *Harivaṃśa* version of this myth, namely, the chain or lasso worn by the centauress, and the weapon, in this instance, the bow held by the male figure.

Amorous Couple

A fragment of a plaque depicting a man and a woman locked in each other's arms is preserved in an ASI photograph (Fig. 11.41). Not seen having seen it at close range, Agrawala's description will have to suffice. He writes:

> The male figure is kissing his partner by drawing her lower lip between his lips (*adhara-pāna*). Her hair is tied in a braid at the nape, and his hair covers the head in frizzled locks gathered in a topknot at the back fastened by a garland. The scene may be related to Śiva's amours with Pārvatī after their re-union, which forms a subject of elaborate description in the *Kumārasaṃbhava* of Kalidasa.[112]

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[112] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 66.

11.41. Fragment of a terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā ACI. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

Two Warriors

This is arguably the most exquisite plaque found at ACI and although this energetic composition is partially damaged, its condition is relatively good (Fig. 11.42). The panel depicts a pair of crowned archers astride chariots. Facing one another, the figures arch their backs as they prepare to release arrows from the taut bows held in their outstretched hands. Their concentrated facial expressions convey the intensity of the moment. Across their chests they wear elegant *channavīras* strung with bells and with a *kīrttimukha* medallion at the centre. The archers are adorned with identical long-hooped earrings, armlets and bracelets. Their large eyes are almond-shaped and their expressive arched eyebrows are composed of one sweeping line (Fig. 11.43).

11.42. Terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā ACI depicting two warriors. The panel measures 64 x 71 x 9 cm and is on display in the National Museum, New Delhi. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

Their brows are furrowed and their noses are long and straight, with well-defined nostrils. The faces of the warriors are oval and narrow. These features are comparable to the much-praised head of Śiva from ACI, said to be one of the masterpieces of Gupta terracotta art (Fig. 9.50).[113] It is evident that both the plaque and the Śiva head were produced during the same period. Instead of wearing two quivers of arrows as is usual with warriors or forest dwellers depicted in narrative panels from this period, these characters wear four; one behind each shoulder and one behind each hip (the figure on the left is missing a quiver). In the midst of the archers stands a small male figure with loose curly locks parted in the centre. Agrawala describes him as a drummer (*dundubhika*) although only a fragment of his instrument survives (Fig. 11.44).[114]

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[113] Dhavalikar, p. 41.

[114] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 67.

11.43. (a), (b) and (c) details of the warriors.

Two beautiful but damaged horses wear ornate *kakṣyābandhas* and pull the chariots. The extant chariot on the right is superbly modelled and composed of interlocking looped bands embellished with a delicate quadrangular motif. The sides of the chariot reach below the waist of the archer. A miniscule charioteer stands in front of the warrior on the right of the plaque holding the reins of the horses in his hands (Fig. 11.45). Behind the archer on the left hand side is a flag standard with a mascot which represents either a boar or a bull, while behind the archer on the right is a flag standard bearing a crescent moon (Fig. 11.46).[115]

About the plaque Agrawala writes:

> The scene of the battle between two warriors, the small figure of a boar and the provenance of the plaque in a Śiva temple might suggest its identification with the *Kirātārjunīya* story in which Śiva as a wild hunter had to take up arms against Arjuna to establish his right to a boar.[116]

This myth narrated in the *Mahābhārata* (3.39-40) describes how both the *kirāta* (Śiva disguised as a hunter), and Arjuna simultaneously take aim at a *rākṣasa* in the form of a boar. Śiva's arrow hits the boar, greatly angering Arjuna who vows to kill the hunter.

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[115] The mascot on the left resembles a boar with its upturned tail and snout, however, the legs are much closer to those of a bull, as is the seating position.

[116] Ibid., p. 67.

11.44. The drummer.

11.45. The charioteer.

11.46. Detail of the plaque showing the two standards. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

Thus, they engage in combat firing arrows at each other. Eventually the identity of the hunter is revealed to Arjuna who is subsequently forgiven by the god.[117] Impressed by Arjuna's bravery, Śiva, with tremendous benevolence, gifts him with the precious Pāśupata weapon.[118] Returning to the plaque, we might speculate that the lack of attributes possessed by the archers can be explained by Śiva's anonymity in the earlier part of the myth. Moreover, the standard depicting the crescent moon may cleverly reveal his identity. Likewise, the boar standard could allude to the *rākṣasa*. If this identification were correct then it would certainly be an enigmatic and clever portrayal recalling the Gupta penchant for hidden or multiple layers of meaning.[119] The *kirātārjunīya* is not a story that found its way onto many relief panels of the Gupta period. It is told through a sequence of scenes on the Pāśupata Nagari crossbar. Here the panel depicting the moment when Arjuna and the hunter (Śiva) face each other with their bows and arrows is worn and fragmented, however, the composition with the bows at the centre in symmetrical alignment recalls the Ahichhatrā panel. Compelling though the *kirātārjunīya* identification might be, Agrawala is no doubt correct when he dismisses it on the grounds that the archers are clothed in regal attire

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[117] *Mahābhārata* 3.39.
[118] Ibid., 3.40.
[119] Willis, 'The Archaeology and Politics of Time', pp. 40-41.

rather than the typical garb of hunters.[120] He proposes an alternative reading of the panel:

> The boar formed the crest of the royal dynasty of the Chalukyas … [who] made their flag known as *pālidhvaja.* Vinayaditya Satyasraya is said to have won this decoration after subduing a northern king and reducing a Ceylonese contemporary to the rank of a tributary. The warrior with the boar standard may on this basis be identified as a Chalukya ruler, either Vinayaditya Satyasraya himself (A.D. 688-695), or his grandfather Pulakesin II (A.D. 608-642), whose successful resistance against Harsha, king of North India, was a well-known event in the seventh century. Ahichchhatrā was under the direct influence of Harsha from his court at Kanauj, and it is possible that the contest between Harsha and Pulakesin supplied the theme of representation for this terracotta panel.[121]

Since the other panels at Bhimgaja (and on other temples of the Gupta period) depict mythological scenes, it is unlikely that an historical event was portrayed here and particularly one that probably post-dates the panel. Agrawala's hypothesis is further weakened by the flag standard bearing a crescent moon. This he believes is the standard belonging to the defeated emperor Harṣavardhana. The crescent moon, however, is a symbol often associated with Śiva and therefore it seems improbable that it would be utilised here in this context. Agrawala does acknowledge that the presence of this event on a Śiva temple cannot be explained and suggests that 'perhaps the final extension and renovation of the Śiva temple on site ACI was undertaken after that event about the middle of the seventh century at the instance of Harsha, whose devotion to Śiva is recorded both by Bāṇabhaṭṭa and Yuan Chwang [Xuanzang].'[122] It makes little sense that a temple renovated 'at the instance' of Harṣa would depict an event in which he was not the victor.

T. N. Ramachandran has identified this terracotta relief as depicting a myth from the *Mahābhārata* involving Yudhiṣṭhira and Jayadratha.[123] Yudhiṣṭhira is the eldest of the five Pāṇḍava brothers and the embodiment of *dharma* (righteousness).

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[120] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 67.

[121] Ibid., p. 67.

[122] Ibid., p. 67.

[123] See T. N. Ramachandran, 'An Interesting Terracotta Plaque from Ahichchhatra, U.P.', *Indian Historical Quarterly*, 27 (1951), pp. 304-311.

Jayadratha, ruler of the Sindhus, married into the Kaurava clan and is thus an enemy of the Pāṇḍavas. He is responsible for abducting Draupadī, the wife of Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers (MBh 3.248-56), an event which might be considered the antithesis of *dharma*. Some time later, the Pāṇḍava brothers engage in battle with Jayadratha at Kurukṣetra. After Bhīma captures Jayadratha, Yudhiṣṭhira urges his brother to set the ungrateful prince free.[124] Eventually Jayadratha is slain by Arjuna. Jayadratha is described in the epic as carrying a standard with a silver boar (MBh 7. 105. 212), while Yudhiṣṭhira's standard is described as depicting a golden moon (MBh 7. 23. 56). Since both warriors are identical in the panel, it is probable we are supposed to identify the characters by their standards.

If the standard is adorned with a boar then Ramachandran's attribution would be quite persuasive if not rather surprising, considering that, to the best of my knowledge, there is only one very brief episode in the epic which lucidly describes a battle between Yudhiṣṭhira and Jayadratha. The plot unfolds as follows: Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa leave Kurukṣetra for some time and in their absence Yudhiṣṭhira and the other Pāṇḍavas are left in charge of the battlefield. Their enemy, Droṇa, arranges his army in a circular formation with the intention of capturing Yudhiṣṭhira. Growing weary and unable to cope with the onslaught, Yudhiṣṭhira asks the valiant warrior, Abhimanyu – son of Arjuna, nephew of Kṛṣṇa and an incarnation of Varchas, the son of the moon god Candra – to pierce the circular formation. Abhimanyu does so and over the course of a lengthy battle with tremendous bravery proceeds to kill ten thousand warriors (MBh 7.31-47). To the great sorrow of the Pāṇḍavas, Abhimanyu is eventually slain. Before Abhimanyu's death, however, Jayadratha battles with the Pāṇḍava brothers.[125] In MBh 7.41 Jayadratha and his chariot are described as follows:

> His standard bearing the device of a large boar in silver, looked exceedingly beautiful. With his white umbrella and banners, and the yak-tails with which he was fanned – which are regal indications – he shone like the moon himself in the firmament. His car-fence made of iron was decked with pearls and diamonds and

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[124] Simon Brodbeck, 'Gendered Genesis and its Soteriologico-narrative Ramifications', in *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata*, ed. by Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 146-176 (p. 158).

[125] In Mbh 7.40 Jayadratha is granted a boon by Śiva that meant he was able to check all Pāṇḍava brothers in battle with the exception of Arjuna.

> gems and gold. And it looked resplendent like the firmament bespangled with luminous bodies.[126]

As an aside, this description fits rather well with the exquisite appearance of the chariot depicted in the plaque. After firing arrows at various Pāṇḍava warriors Jayadratha faces Yudhiṣṭhira:

> And piercing Yudhisthira then with seventy arrows, the ruler of the Sindhus pierced the other heroes of the Pandava army with thick showers of shafts … Then, O monarch, the valiant son of Dharma [Yudhiṣṭhira], aiming at Jayadratha's bow, cut it off with a polished and well-tempered shaft, smiling the while. Within the twinkling, however, of the eye, the ruler of the Sindhus took up another bow and piercing Pratha (Yudhiṣṭhira) with ten arrows struck each of the others with three shafts.[127]

This brief encounter does not seem particularly significant, and thus its presence on the walls of ACI might only be explained if it were originally one of a sequence of plaques telling of the heroism of Abhimanyu and perhaps the death of Jayadratha at the hands of Arjuna. This suggestion is not beyond the realms of possibility since many plaques from ACI must have been lost. As an indication of this, a photograph taken during the 1940s excavations captures the poor, fragmentary state that some plaques were found in (Fig. 11.47). Moreover, the myth of the destruction of Dakṣa's sacrifice was told in two plaques from ACI (and possibly more originally).

If the animal depicted on the flag standard is a bull rather than a boar, then this would indicate that the character represented could be Jarasandha, king of Magadha, who eventually met his demise at the hands of Bhima. Jarasandha was a devotee of Śiva and plays an important role in the *Mahābhārata*. His two daughters were married to Kaṃsa, the despotic uncle of Lord Kṛṣṇa. After Kṛṣṇa killed his uncle, Jarasandha took revenge and attacked Kṛṣṇa's capital, Mathurā, repeatedly, until the latter moved to Dvārakā.

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[126] 7.41 in *The Mahābhārata,* trans. by Ganguli, p. 218.

[127] Ibid., p. 218.

11.47. This is the condition that the plaque depicting gaṇas eating sweets at Dakṣa's sacrifice was unearthed in. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1940-44.

Jarasandha was not able to invade the well-protected island of Dvārakā and so he began preparations for a grand *yajña* to Śiva in order to be granted greater power by the god. The *yajña* involved the sacrifice of a hundred kidnapped rulers. To rescue the unfortunate kings, Kṛṣṇa devised a clever plot (MBh 2.14-24). He appealed to Yudhiṣṭhira who was intent on becoming emperor, by telling him that the only obstacle standing in his path was Jarasandha. So, with Yudhiṣṭhira's blessings, Bhima and Arjuna, disguised as Brahmins, attended a *puja* held by Jarasandha. Following the *puja*, Jarasandha offered the Brahmins a gift. They asked that he wrestle one of them. Jarasandha chose to wrestle Bhima and after fourteen days of fighting the wicked king was finally slain by being split in two. Though the episode connects Yudhiṣṭhira and Jarasandha with one another, at no moment do they face each other in combat. Thus the character depicted on the left of the plaque is highly unlikely to be Jarasandha. For the time being, then, Ramachandran's identification remains the most convincing, and yet, the brevity and relative insignificance of the battle between Yudhiṣṭhira and Jayadratha certainly raises questions.

Dating ACI and ACII

It has been generally agreed that the Gangā and Yamunā sculptures from ACI are Gupta in date. Harle, for example, suggests that the 'superb Gangā and Yamunā figures, with their mannered elegance, [are] the largest and unquestionably the finest Gupta terracottas so far known.' In contrast, he describes the plaques as executed in 'an unselfconscious rather bumptious style'[128] Based on overwhelming stylistic and iconographic similarities, however, it seems that some – if not all – of the reliefs and sculptures are contemporaneous. A comparison between one of the *gaṇa* figures from the plaque detailing the destruction of Dakṣa's sacrifice with the male attendant figure standing to the left of the goddess Yamunā, for example, shows the figures to have similar round facial features with large squat noses and pronounced protruding eyes. The arched eyebrows belonging to both figures are incised into the clay and meet in the middle. A terracotta head in the Brooklyn Museum (Figs. 9.48 and 11.24) also shares these features and most probably hails from ACI. Moreover, it might even be suggested that it was made by the same *pustakāra(s)* as the Gangā and Yamunā reliefs. Certain features of the river goddess sculptures are suggestive of an early Gupta date. Both goddesses, for example, exhibit the small waists and very wide hips of Kuṣāṇa period females, and their stances are not perhaps as fluid as many figurative depictions from the mature Gupta period onwards. Despite not holding the type of supple serpentine poses seen, for instance, in the figurative sculptures of Deogaṛh, they are nevertheless far from being static and wooden in appearance, and their attendant figures are more sinuous.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, at least four of the plaques from ACI are contemporaneous with one another and with the Gangā and Yamunā reliefs, based on the application of the same motifs and types of ornament as well as similar facial characteristics. These include the two panels depicting Dakṣa's sacrifice, the Nārāyaṇa plaque and the centauress plaque. Interestingly, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, these particular panels, which are in relatively low-relief, recall the sculpture

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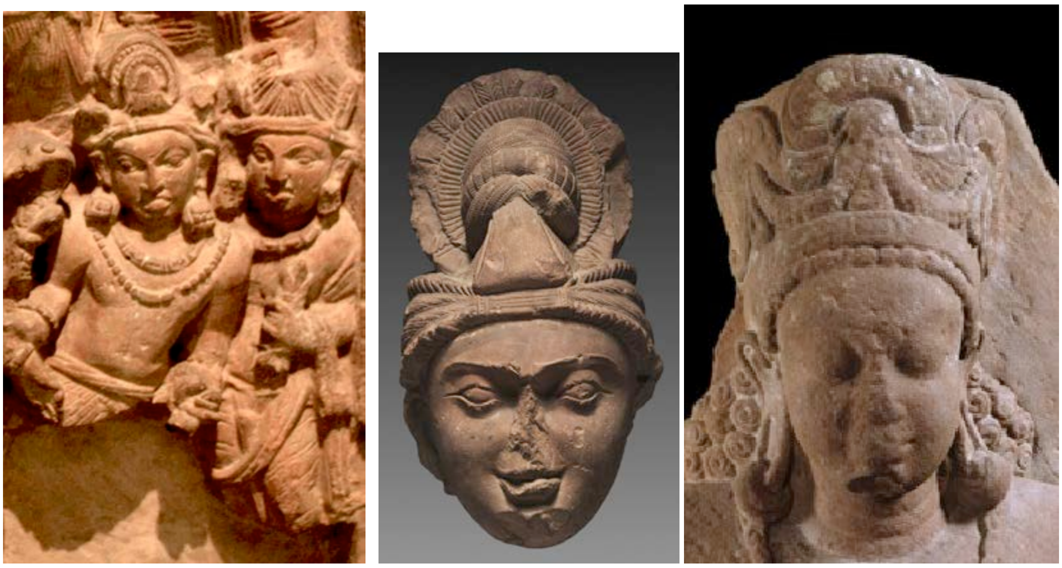
[128] Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, p. 31.

of the Kuṣāṇa period though with a little more finesse and vivacity.[129] The character (probably a representation of Viṣṇu) pictured to the left in Fig. 11.48a, for example, wears a crown that is closer in style to the type of headdress worn by Hindu and Buddhist deities of the Kuṣāṇa period (Fig. 11.48b). A fairly similar type of headdress also crowns an early Gupta period Viṣṇu image from Mathurā, housed in the Ashmolean Museum (Fig. 11.48c). As the Gupta period progresses Viṣṇu images are more commonly represented with cylindrical crowns (see Fig. 9.5).



11.48. (a) Detail of plaque from ACI depicting the destruction of Dakṣa's sacrifice; (b) a Bodhisattva image from Mathurā dating to the Kuṣāṇa period. Photograph courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art; (c) a 4th century (early Gupta period) image of Viṣṇu from Mathurā. Photograph courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum.

Neither the Gangā and Yamunā sculptures, nor the relief plaques from Bhimgaja, can be described as characteristically Gupta in style, with the exception of the *gaṇas* and other attendant figures which have more in common with the iconography of the period. One might entertain the idea that the quintessential Gupta style did not take root at Ahichhatrā. This notion, however, can be easily disregarded, since the plaques from the ancient city depicting a *śālabañjikā*, (Fig. 11.8) and Pralamba and Balarāma (Fig. 11.9), along with a number of other terracotta fragments housed in the State

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[129] Agrawala broadly dates the plaques from Ahichhatrā ACI to between 450 and 650 CE. See Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 63. James Harle on the other hand situates them between the mid- and late fifth century CE, firmly in the Gupta period. See Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, p. 31. Krishna Deva dates the plaques and sculptures from ACI to the later half of the sixth century. See Deva, p. 26.

Museum, Allahabad, are overtly Gupta in style.[130] Additionally a sculptural fragment from ACII depicting a drummer, a fragment of a Dampati plaque from ACIII and a fragment housed in the British Museum portraying a pot-bellied musician, are all characteristic of the art of the Gupta period (Figs. 11.49, 11.50 and 11.51). Agrawala also mentions a small, refined moulded head of Śiva found in the north wall of the pyramidal monument ACII, which he describes with confidence 'as a beautiful specimen of Gupta art.'[131]

11.49. Fragment of a terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā depicting a male musician. Reserve collections of the British Museum.

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[130] Regrettably, the find spots of the panels have not been recorded.
[131] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 28. See Plate XIII (Fig. 115).

11.50. Fragment of a terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā ACII depicting a male drummer. National Museum, New Delhi.

11.51. Fragment of a terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā ACIII. National Museum, New Delhi.

It is worth noting that the reliefs and sculptures from ACI are more skillfully executed, and the art form more evolved, than we find with the interesting though rather stilted figurative terracotta plaques found at several sites in Rajasthan including at Raṅgamahal. The panels from the latter site have been broadly dated to the first half of the fourth century CE (see Chapter 9), although the presence of Hellenistic style clothing and ornament in the panels might be suggestive of a slightly earlier date.

In terms of archaeological findings that could assist us in the dating of the monuments, two important pieces of evidence have been reported. Firstly, Führer noted that Mitra coins were found in at least one of the terraced structures (see Chapter 6).[132] Since he partially excavated ACII, we might conjecture that it was this monument he was referring to, though this cannot be validated. As discussed in Chapter 5, it is thought that the Mitra kings ruled over Ahichhatrā from around the first century BCE until the city was absorbed into the Gupta Empire in *circa* the mid-fourth century CE. It is likely then, that construction began on at least one of the two pyramidal temples while a late Mitra ruler was on the throne. Secondly, Ghosh informs us that one of the structures was built 'on a level yielding typical pottery of the Kuṣāṇa period.'[133] Presumably he was referring to the circular or apsidal monument found at the foundation level of ACI, which was discovered strewn with broken pots (Figs. 6.47 and 6.48). From this, Ghosh jumps to the conclusion that the earliest stage of both structures dates to the Gupta period.[134]

Bhuvan Vikrama, who supervised extensive excavations at Ahichhatrā (not at ACI and ACII) between 2005-2011, asserts that ACI was the earlier temple, but has not outlined his reasons.[135] For the time being we are not able to reach a definitive conclusion, but I am more inclined to believe that the larger of the pyramidal monuments was constructed after ACII, based on its grander scale, its ornamental brickwork, which shares much in common with that adorning the late Gupta temple at Bhītargāon, and because it has staircases on the east and west rather than just on the west as at ACII. It might be suggested that construction began on ACII during the late Mitra period though the few sculptures that survive from the monument are Gupta in date. Some of the magnificent ornamental bricks from the ACII monument are fairly similar in motif and style to pilaster and frieze fragments from the Devnimori *stūpa* dating to *circa* the third quarter of the fourth century CE. Construction may have started on ACI shortly after ACII, possibly in the early Gupta period.[136] As mentioned in Chapter 6 the form of the *liṅga* crowning ACI

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[132] Sarkar, pp. 44-45.
[133] Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple I*, p. 174.
[134] Ibid., p. 174.
[135] Vikrama's position on the matter is made obvious by the title of his paper: 'The Forgotten Giant, The Earliest Terraced Temple at Ahichhatra'; however, why he believes this temple to be earlier than ACII has not been explored in the paper.
[136] A figurative frieze fragment found in the vicinity of ACII during my first visit to the site (Fig. 8.17) depicts the bust of a female clothed in the same type of blouse worn by the Gangā and Yamunā

corresponds with the description in Varāhamira's *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, which dates to the sixth century CE.[137] It might be very tentatively suggested, then, that ACI in its first stage dates to the early Gupta period, though the *liṅga* and some of the sculptures might potentially be slightly later additions.

Conclusion

In conclusion; the surviving plaques from ACI might depict the *gaṇa* Nīlalohita, who is a form of Rudra, with a deceased buffalo demon slung over his shoulders (the same deity may be portrayed in two further plaques, although Bhairava is also a possible candidate); Caṇḍeśvara; the *gaṇas* and Śaiva deities including Caṇḍeśvara and Vīrabhadra destroying Dakṣa's sacrifice; *gaṇas* stealing and eating sweets at Dakṣa's sacrifice; Sage Nārāyaṇa after having created Urvaśī; a *kinnarī* with a human or divine lover – this couple are enigmatic but might represent Urvaśī and Purūravas, or more possibly, Saṃjñā and Vivasvant; two warriors who again cannot be confidently identified but might represent Yudhiṣṭhira and Jayadratha; and an amorous couple. Lastly, there is the unique and enigmatic three-headed fire-breathing Bhairava image, yet to be satisfactorily identified, though at present, the most convincing hypothesis might be a composite form of Agni and Rudra.

Yudhiṣṭhira upholds *dharma*; the sages Nara and Nārāyaṇa are beyond lust and temptation; Caṇḍeśvara is the leader of the *gaṇas* and punishes the transgressions of Śaiva initiates; the myth of Dakṣa's sacrifice demonstrates Śiva's supremacy over the other gods; the slaying of the buffalo demon by Nīlalohita may be symbolic of Rudra conquering death;[138] Bhairava, or perhaps in this case Nīlalohita, commits the greatest of sins, Brahminicide, but eventually purifies even sin itself.[139] Thus, the subject matter, which focuses for a large part on the mastering of the self, is quite

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sculptures from ACI. We cannot be sure that the fragment originally adorned the walls of ACII, but if it did it would suggest a fairly close date for both monuments.

[137] Adh: LVIII. Sl. 53-53 in *Varahamira's Brihat Samhita*, pp. 515-516.

[138] As discussed earlier in the chapter, buffalos are the symbol of the god of death, Yama. On the subject of Rudra conquering death see Kramrisch, *The Presence of Siva*, p. 60.

[139] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1976), p. 281.

suitable for a Pāśupata temple, or at least for a form of popular Śaivism following principles similar to that of the Pāśupata movement. We find humour – for example, in the depiction of a *gaṇa* on the verge of gobbling a sweet – and amorosity in the plaques representing a kissing couple and the *kinnarī* with her princely lover.

Interestingly, in the *Mahābhārata*, Yudhiṣṭhira and Sage Nārāyaṇa are both involved in the events surrounding the myth of Dakṣa's sacrifice – though not in all versions of the tale, as Simon Brodbeck elaborates at length:

> The basic plot: Dakṣa fails to assign Śiva a share in his sacrifice, but Śiva enforces his inclusion in perpetuity. In the version Kṛṣṇa tells Yudhiṣṭhira at 10.18, Śiva's arrow hits the sacrifice in the heart, at which it becomes a deer, flees to the sky, and flares up; and at the end, after being attacked with his bow, the gods offer Śiva all the oblations (*sarvāṇi havīṃṣi*, 10. 18: 23). Here, and when Kṛṣṇa tells Yudhiṣṭhira the story again at 13. 145: 11-23, Śiva performs specific mutilations upon Pūṣan and other gods. In the version Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira at 12.274, Dakṣa Prajāpati's sacrifice is a horse sacrifice (*hayamedha*, 12.274: 23), and Śiva is encouraged to attend (with his gang) by his wife Umā. Attacked, the sacrifice flees as a deer; Śiva gives chase with bow and arrow … In the version Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna at 12.330: 42-71, Dadhīci urges Śiva to intervene, and Śiva's weapon is a spear (*śūla*), which after destroying the sacrifice careers towards the Badarī *āśrama*. It hits Nārāyaṇa and a fight begins; but Brahmā intervenes, and Śiva, pacified, declares his identity with Nārāyaṇa.[140]

It is tempting to imagine that a number of the terracotta panels from ACI might have had interwoven narratives; and although Brodbeck's discussion on the various myths of Dakṣa's sacrifice certainly forges a link between a few of the characters depicted on the plaques, the links are perhaps tenuous. For example, Sage Nārāyaṇa is probably portrayed creating the nymph Urvaśī from his thigh which bears no direct link to the Dakṣa myth. Likewise, if the warriors represent Yudhiṣṭhira and Jayadratha, then they have been represented in battle, rather than the former being in conversation with Kṛṣṇa.

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[140] Simon Pearse Brodbeck, *The Mahābhārata Patriline, Gender, Culture and the Royal Hereditary* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 91.

Within the broader context of extant Gupta and early post-Gupta art, many of the subjects chosen for the Bhimgaja plaques are unusual or even unique, but then again, we have no means of establishing how much comparative material has been lost. Narrative imagery dating from the fourth to sixth centuries is on the whole extraordinarily varied, as demonstrated by the diversity of stories from the *Rāmāyaṇa* depicted in this period on both stone and brick temples (see Chapter 9). Śaiva narrative scenes are few and far between, though, and thus the iconography chosen for Bhimgaja is unusual in more ways than one. Moreover, not only individual narrative panels featured on the upper terrace of the Śaiva monument, but also narrative sequences evidenced by the two plaques illustrating episodes of Dakṣa's sacrifice and the three panels seemingly relating stories of the deeds of Nīlalohita, or alternatively, Bhairava.

As explored in the previous chapter, Pawāyā also produced some rather intriguing images such as the pillar capital depicting addorsed figures, though nothing quite as singular as the multi-headed fire-breathing character from Ahichhatrā. The many lunettes from Pawāyā depicting male and female busts are a common feature of Gupta and Vākāṭaka temples and would have been situated within *candraśālās*. Busts on this scale have not been recorded from Ahichhatrā but two small *candraśālā* fragments including a figurative brick housed at the Allahabad Museum, and the head and bust of a *vidyādhara*, likewise situated on the narrow end of a brick and hailing from the smaller terraced monument ACII, have been reported, and no doubt there were many more of this type.[141]

Terracottas dating from the fourth to sixth centuries are far more plentiful at Ahichhatrā than at Pawāyā and also more diverse stylistically. The regional influence is evidently strong at the former site, as much of the sculpture cannot be described as typically Gupta in style. We are reminded that Ahichhatrā was on the periphery of the Gupta Empire although it evidently held strong links with Mathurā. There is also a notable distinction between the refined and the 'folk' terracottas at Ahichhatrā which may reflect both the hierarchical society, and the differing functions of terracotta sculptures. The quality of some of the sculpture from both the Viṣṇu temple at Pawāyā and Bhimgaja at Ahichhatrā is superb and suggests that these

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[141] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 59.

temples with their monumental pyramidal bases must have been remarkably grand and important in their heyday. At both Pawāyā and at Ahichhatrā we find certain parallels with the ornamental architectural elements and terracotta plaques at Bhītargāon, and we can imagine that there were several such temples dotted across the Gupta Empire.

Turning to themes of Gupta period sculpture in general, the findings are interesting. While there are numerous popular gods, goddesses, celestial beings and minor divinities that crop up at many religious sites of the period, as already mentioned, narrative imagery is especially rich and diverse. The latter point is confined largely to Vaiṣṇava imagery, and most notably that related to the *avatāras* Rāma and Kṛṣṇa. The sheer diversity of imagery makes the art historian's job of identifying particular scenes more challenging as many of the reliefs are of an individual nature. As far as iconography is concerned, we witness a certain flexibility and creative freedom in the art of this era, although formalisation was gradually becoming established. Certain compositions, particularly those depicting scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, are strongly reminiscent of stage sets, suggesting that narrative iconography might have sometimes sought inspiration from theatre or dance productions.

Lastly, during the course of Part Two of this thesis, numerous questions have come to light on the subject of iconographic nuances or identification of characters and narratives. Although frustrating at times, this level of enquiry has demonstrated that our understanding of the art of the Gupta period is still incredibly piecemeal. Moreover, it also emphasises how scholarship only occasionally treads beyond the superficial. Often we find that trickier questions are entirely avoided or, alternatively, convenient but inaccurate conclusions are reached. It is hoped that despite not having been able to conclusively answer all of the questions raised in Part Two, these chapters will have created a sound base for future scholarship, particularly on the terracotta art of this period.

Chapter 12: Conclusion

Introduction

At the start of this research I set out to fulfil a number of goals, namely: to chart the evolution and spread of terraced architecture in the subcontinent with added emphasis placed on the brick structures dating from the fourth to sixth centuries CE; to advance scholarship on Hindu brick temple architecture of the Gupta period, focusing on the formal qualities of the terraced monuments at Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā, and the temple at Bhītargāon; to understand the nature and function of each of the ornamental brick fragments from Ahichhatrā in the reserve collections of the British Museum and elsewhere, and to compare and contrast the motifs on the bricks with other examples from stone and brick temples and *stūpas* dating from before and during the Gupta period; to explore the key characteristics of Gupta period sculpture, and particularly that in the medium of terracotta; to develop an understanding of some of the themes illustrated on the reliefs and stone sculptures from Pawāyā and to give new-interpretations where necessary; to question whether the temple at Pawāyā and its iconography carries a political message; and lastly, to offer a new reading of several of the terracotta panels from Ahichhatrā ACI, while endeavouring to understand how the plaques fit into the wider context of the city, and with Gupta art in general.

From the outset, the limitations placed on this research were determined by the poor state of the temples and of some of the terracottas; the scarcity of excavation reports; the fact that many of the relief panels explored in the thesis have been divorced from their original settings, while in some case their find spots are not known; and by the shortage of scholarship on the subject of Gupta period terracotta art and architecture.

In light of these limitations my approach included site visits; an ongoing exchange of communications with archaeologists who had excavated at Ahichhatrā; measuring and photographing relevant pieces on display or held in the reserve collections of several museums; retrieving excavation photographs from the archives of the Archaeological Survey of India; reading through numerous archaeology reports and historical and sacred texts; map making; and in some cases making drawings which enabled me to observe details in the structures and sculptural reliefs that might have otherwise been missed.

Terraced Architecture: Synthesis of Research and Results

The first part of this thesis addressed the architectural form and evolution of terraced brick temple architecture in the subcontinent, with the central focus being on Gupta period Hindu monuments, and in particular, the terraced structures at Pawāyā and Ahichhatrā. To date, scholarship on the architecture of the Gupta period has focused overwhelmingly on stone and cave temples, with brick architecture – in particular that on a monumental scale – overlooked. To some degree this oversight may reflect a higher regard for stone architecture, but the limitations set by the poor state of Gupta period brick monuments – most of them little more than foundations – are likely to constitute the primary reason for the shortage of scholarship on the subject. Thus, the drawing attention to and mapping out of the several monumental terraced brick structures built during the Gupta and Vākāṭaka periods, together constitute one of the significant contributions to knowledge made in this thesis. Moreover, all of the excavated terraced monuments constructed in the subcontinent – spanning a period of fourteen hundred years or more, up until the eleventh century CE – have been collated here for the first time and mapped. This has helped to develop an understanding of the evolution of terraced architecture and also its dispersal across India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Kashmir. In addition, the dissemination of terraced monuments along various branches of the Silk Road and overseas to Southeast Asia has been explored. The spread of this mode of architecture pays testament to the influential position of the Indian subcontinent in the first few centuries CE.

In agreement with H. G. Franz, I believe that terraced temple architecture in the subcontinent had its roots in Kuṣāṇa period Gandhāra, or at the very least, was popularized from there. However, the later monumental structures in brick deviate significantly in form from most of the stone *stūpas* of Swāt and Taxila. The multi-tiered platforms of ACI and ACII at Ahichhatrā; the Viṣṇu temple at Pawāyā; the Śiva temple and the so-called residential structure at Mansar; the *stūpas* at

Naṅdangarh, Sārnāth, Śrāvastī and Kesariyā; the Gobind Bhita monument in Mahāsthān; and the Bharat Bhayan Temple in Jessore all demonstrate that terraced monuments constructed during the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries CE possess generous proportions and wide terraces that could be circumambulated with ease. The terraced platforms were constructed on a cellular plan from brick-walled boxes filled with rubble or earth. This was an economic approach to building structures on a large-scale, and also a means by which to strengthen monumental edifices by rendering the platforms solid. This technique was also used for the construction of the single-tiered platforms beneath the brick temples at Bhitarī, Sirpur, Bhītargāon and most probably elsewhere.

In the centuries that followed the Gupta period, terraced monuments became increasingly complex in design, the most notable being the *stūpa* situated atop six terraces at Kesariyā in Bihar, which is still undergoing excavation. Although its first phase is believed to date to the Gupta period, it underwent a transformative programme of expansion and renovation under the Pāla rulers. The later terraced structures in the subcontinent are all Buddhist and mostly cruciform in plan. Only six terraced structures can be confidently identified as having a Hindu affiliation and these date to between the third or fourth and seventh centuries CE. Why Hindu temples constructed on multi-storied bases ceased to be built relatively early on, despite their commanding nature, is not yet understood. The demise of terraced architecture in the Hindu domain, however, happens to coincide with the fruition of temple architecture in stone. No longer the small cave-like structures of the Gupta period, stone and rock-hewn temples were by the eighth century increasingly large-scale and ambitious in form.[1] Moreover, the mainstream *Nāgara* and *Drāviḍa* styles of architecture in both stone and brick, dominated the landscape. It might be conjectured, then, that following these developments, terraced structures became obsolete.

Questions are raised in the thesis about whether some of the Hindu terraced monuments were constructed in part with the intention of challenging the power of local Buddhist institutions. At Śrāvastī, for example, at least one of the terraced brick monuments (Kacchi Kuṭi) is thought to have been converted from a Buddhist *stūpa*

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[1] Small-scale temples were still being constructed in this period alongside temples on a grander scale.

into a Hindu shrine at around the time of the Gupta period.[2] More research, however, is needed in order to substantiate this theory. At Ahichhatrā, Buddhism may have been established in the city from the Maurya period onwards – long before the earliest Hindu temples were constructed in the fourth and fifth centuries CE. It might then be tentatively argued that the Śaivas felt compelled to assert their authority. At the site designated as ACIII at Ahichhatrā, a few Kuṣāṇa Buddhist sculptures or sculptural fragments were found, as well as the base of a small circular structure, which may have been a *stūpa*. From the fourth century onwards, however, numerous Hindu temples were built at ACIII, and no Buddhist findings have been reported. Moreover, at the foundation level of ACI, the ruins of a circular or apsidal Kuṣāṇa period brick structure were unearthed, which may have been a Buddhist monument – although, since no evidence has been found or at any rate documented, this cannot be verified. It is important to remain circumspect, since the prevalence of Hindu monuments within the fortress following the Kuṣāṇa period may have more to do with the leanings of the local rulers and elites than with religious competition. It is likely that the Nāga kings of Ahichhatrā and, later, the Gupta administrators in the city, adhered to a Hindu faith. Thus it would not be surprising if they had appropriated the land at the heart of the citadel for constructing temples to their deities. In contrast, archaeological field surveys carried out at Mansar and in the surrounding areas by Harriet Lacey between 2011 and 2014 have revealed that there was no settlement at the site prior to the Vākāṭaka period. Thus the locality was probably envisaged from the outset as a royal complex for worship and devotion. At the ancient city of Padmāvatī (Pawāyā), only the terraced monument and a field with residential structures have been unearthed, so little is known at present of the wider religious picture at the site.

After mapping out all of the terraced monuments known to me, it became evident that they were built on – or in proximity to – major trade routes, in locations that either had sizeable populations and/or royal patronage, as at Mansar. The location of the monumental structures within the subcontinent and beyond suggests that pilgrimage and trade were paramount both for the spread of this type of architecture and for its upkeep. In the 8th century CE, or possibly earlier, terraced architecture also spread via overseas trade and pilgrimage to various parts of Southeast Asia.

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[2] *Sravasti* (Archaeological Survey of India, Lucknow Circle) <http://asilucknowcircle.nic.in/fancybox/pdf/Sravasti%20English.pdf>

Interestingly, in Cambodia, Śiva temples on multi-tiered platforms were constructed up until at least the tenth century CE, while terraced Buddhist monuments were constructed until around the twelfth century CE.

The Pawāyā Monument

All of the brick terraced monuments in the subcontinent have undergone expansion, renovation, and conservation – in some cases, several times. Moreover, they have been damaged by erosion, and sometimes by brick theft or natural disasters. Together, these factors have placed major constraints on this research because, in the absence of detailed excavation reports, it has been difficult and sometimes impossible to determine the original form of the structures with any precision. The multi-tiered platform at Pawāyā, built in two phases, has to an extent proved an exception, although there is no trace of the surmounting temple. Not only is this likely to be the earliest non-Buddhist terraced monument surviving in the subcontinent, but in addition archaeologists have exposed part of the original base, which had been covered up when the base platform was expanded. The original base was preserved in very good condition, and thus its importance in the history of South Asian temple architecture cannot be underestimated. The ornamental brickwork on the earlier *jaṅghā* bears some similarity to the blind colonnades that adorn many of the *stūpas* of the first to third centuries CE from Gandhāra. The archaic nature of the brickwork indicates that the Pawāyā temple was built either by the Nāgas (first to mid-fourth century CE), or by the early Guptas before the characteristic Gupta style had fully manifested. Based on style, the terracotta relief fragments, stone sculptures, ornamental bricks and the stone *toraṇa* lintel all appear to date to the early Gupta period. Confusion has arisen over the date of the monument in part because the stone lintel bears a relief carving of a terraced structure, which loosely imitates both the form of the actual terraced monument and its pilasters. Thus, either the first phase of the monument and the lintel are contemporaneous, or the lintel was inspired by a structure already in existence. Interestingly, though, the *prāsāda* illustrated on the lintel has three storeys akin to the second phase of construction of the terraced monument.

Whether the Pawāyā monument was constructed after the Guptas annexed the city, or whether it was expanded at that time and given a new affiliation, both scenarios indicate that a political show of strength was being made on the part of the victors. In Chapter 10, the possibility is raised that the temple was dedicated to the Bhagavats, Balarāma and Vāsudeva, which may have been invoked as an analogy for peace between the Nāgas and the Guptas. Alternatively, the temple was dedicated to Viṣṇu, the *iṣṭadēvatā* (the chosen deity) of the Gupta kings.

In its first phase, the Pawāyā monument had two tall lime-plastered platforms both adorned with ornate brickwork. If the first stage of construction did indeed take place before the Gupta period, then no indication of its original affiliation was unearthed during the excavation. However, the upper platform could have been open rather than bearing an enclosed sanctum.

The Nāga Connection

Both Pawāyā and Ahichhatrā were Nāga centres before they were absorbed into the Gupta Empire, and the influence of the Nāgas may have continued long after their rulers were deposed. Mansar, incidentally, also had strong ties with the Nāgas through marriage and political alliance. Owing to the opacity surrounding the early history of the three sites mentioned, however, it is not possible at present to determine whether the Nāga connection is of significance in terms of the spread of Hindu terraced architecture. The nature of the relationship between each of the Nāga cities and their allies is worthy of further research.

Ahichhatrā ACI

The development of an understanding of the formal qualities of ACI or Bhimgaja at Ahichhatrā, in as far as was possible given the limitations mentioned above, was among the main aims of the thesis. The structure was excavated between 1942 and 1944, but no reports or plans of the monument were ever published. One of the principle archaeologists, A. Ghosh, did however note that ACI was expanded and renovated repeatedly until the eleventh century CE.[3] Thus, the monument – which was probably constructed in the late Gupta or early post-Gupta period – may have undergone significant structural changes since its inception. This is especially noticeable on the west face of ACI, as the substantial *bhadra* offset is not in symmetrical alignment with the rest of the building, and, moreover, is haphazard in form. In contrast, the four flights of steps on the east face of ACI are positioned in symmetry with the structure, and were in all likelihood part of the original design of the temple.

ACI is often described as having either three or five platforms; however, it has been argued here that in actuality it had a large square plinth topped by three substantial platforms and a rectangular shrine: an argument based on field research, careful study of the structure and on Cunningham's plan of the now lost temple which surmounted the terraces.[4] There is a possibility, however, that the plinth in its current form was a later addition, as we find at Pawāyā.

The lower three platforms had tall outer walls, which would have created corridors, instead of the open walkways evidenced today. I observed truncated traces of these outer walls in places on the platforms (see, for example, Figs. 12.1 and 12.2). It is quite possible that the collapsed outer walls were adorned with friezes and pilasters, since the only surviving pilaster fragment on ACI is situated on an external wall. This would explain why – to the best of my knowledge – not a single ornamental brick was found *in situ* on the inner walls of the platforms. We can imagine that the exterior appearance of the monument would have been spectacular and awe-inspiring. Upon approaching the monument, devotees would have climbed the steps on either the east or west, and circumambulated the dark corridors of the platforms.[5] The walls of the penultimate terrace were adorned with the large terracotta relief plaques, many of which depict manifest forms of Śiva, or myths involving the god. As described in Chapter 11, the chosen subjects focus overwhelmingly on self-mastery and the overcoming of sin. After observing these powerful images, the devotees would then proceed to the surmounting temple, enshrining the monumental *liṅga*, or potent

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[3] Cited in Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple I*, p. 174.

[4] Vikrama describes ACI as having three terraces (see Vikrama, 'The Forgotten Giant', p. 8); Shrimali describes the monument as having five terraces (see Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 148).

[5] It should be noted that there might have been restrictions about who had access to the temple.

“sign” of the unmanifest Śiva. Moreover, they would have been greeted with spectacular views of the surrounding city through the doorways of the porches, or from the external *pradakṣiṇa-patha,* as though standing at the summit of a mountain.

12.1. The photograph shows children sitting on top of the remnants of the Yamunā niche on ACI. The niche rose to a height of at least 1.78 m above the level of the platform, demonstrating that the outer walls were tall, though not necessarily as tall as the inner walls.

ACII also had walled corridors according to the plan made of the structure by its excavators in the early 1940s. Likewise, the Buddhist monument of Borobudur has corridors instead of open platforms, which enhances the sense of awe when reaching the upper terrace with its sweeping panoramic views. In contrast, there is no surviving evidence that the Pawāyā platforms had tall outer walls, although the possibility cannot be entirely ruled out considering the poor state the monument was in following excavation. It is more likely, however, that the structure would have had low parapet walls as we find surviving in areas on terraces of the so-called residential structure at Mansar, at Antichak and at Pāhāṛpur (Figs. 12.3 and 12.4).

12.2. Bird's eye view of the second platform on the south side. Truncated parts of the outer wall have survived.

Based on a couple of ASI photographs taken during the excavation of ACI, it was possible to determine the original location on the monument of the life-size Gangā and Yamunā sculptures. One photograph captures the lower half of a pilaster next to the Yamunā niche (see Fig. 6.65); part of this pilaster still exists, as does the lower portion of the niche, positioned to the right of the *bhadra* offset on the second terrace of the west face of the monument; the Gangā niche would have been situated to the left of the offset. This finding is significant because it affirms that the main entrance to the shrine was on the west. This is also supported by the existence of a large projection on the west face, and also by the presence of numerous smaller temple foundations in front of the monument on the west, akin to votives or subsidiary shrines.

12.3. Photograph showing part of a ruined outer wall on a terrace of the so-called residential structure at Mansar.

In Chapter 6, it has been argued that the so-called upper terrace of ACI is in all probability the base of the original shrine and two passageways. This theory approximately agrees with Cunningham's measurements of the temple, the foundations of which were still extant when he visited the site in 1862.[6] In itself this is an exciting discovery, and as a result, it means that the terrace beneath is in fact the uppermost platform. Cunningham did not describe the temple ruins beyond providing a floor plan and measurements; for instance, he did not mention whether the exterior walls were adorned with ornamental bricks or terracotta reliefs. On the basis of the floor plan and the type of ornamental bricks found, and indeed the absence of fallen architectural elements such as *āmalasārakas*, a tentative proposal has been made that the shrine was rectangular with a barrel-vaulted roof, and, unusually, had porches on both the east and west. The scale of the floor plan, and the monumental Śiva *liṅga*, both suggest that the temple was grand in proportion, possibly on a par with the Bhītargāon temple (*c*. 15 m in height), or perhaps taller. Potentially ACI might have been upwards of 33 m in height including the terraces, and, as such, would have towered over the local landscape.

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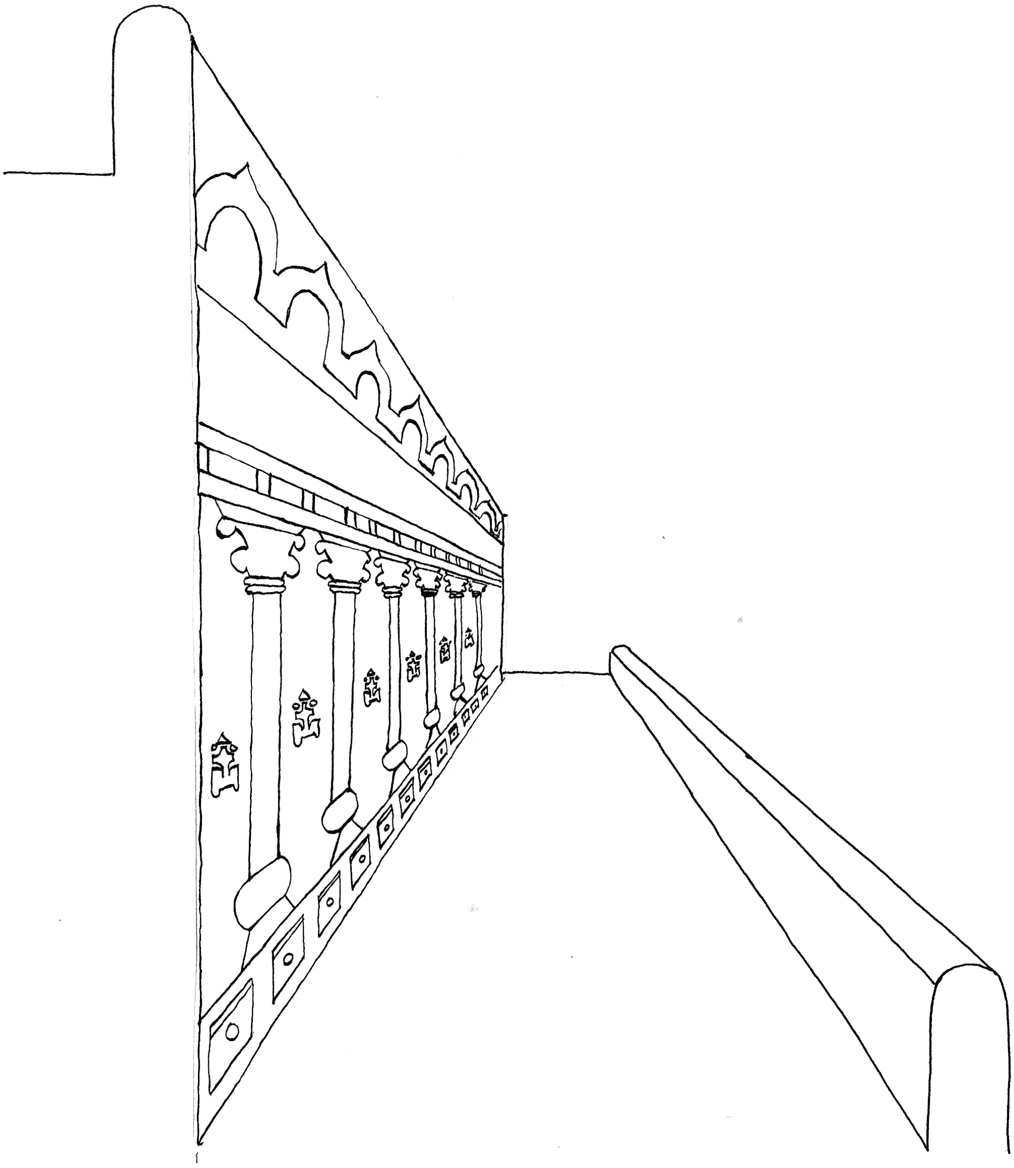
[6] Some variation between measurements is to be expected as further erosion and restoration has taken place since Cunningham's visit.



12.4. A theoretical reconstruction of how a platform at Pawāyā might have looked with a parapet wall.

In contrast to scholars such as Agrawala and Allchin,[7] and in agreement with Hans Bakker, I believe it to be improbable that ACI or ACII belong to the category of *aiḍuka* structures described in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*. This conclusion was reached based on the disparity between the monuments and the textual description, but it is also probable that the *aiḍuka* of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* was a schematic idea that never materialised.[8] Since no Buddhist findings were reported

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[7] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 167; and Allchin, p. 1.
[8] Bakker, 'Monuments to the Dead', p. 43.

from ACI (or for that matter ACII), Shrimali's assertion that ACI was originally a Buddhist *eḍūka* holds even less credibility.[9]

Ornamental Bricks From Ahichhatrā

Research for the thesis began with a study of several ornamental terracotta bricks and sculptural fragments from Ahichhatrā housed in the reserve collections of the British Museum. The find spots of the ornamental bricks and pilaster fragments, which display a variety of carved, moulded, stamped and incised motifs, are not known. The aim of examining these fragments was to develop an understanding of where they would have been situated on a temple. Ornamental bricks were also measured and photographed at Ahichhatrā during my field visits, and likewise, the bricks from the small collection housed in the reserve collections of the National Museum in New Delhi were measured and photographed. In addition, the ASI photographed many ornamental bricks and recorded their find spots during the early 1940s' archaeological excavations. In order to understand where each of these bricks would have been situated on a temple façade, they were compared with similar examples, mostly still *in situ* on stone and brick temples of the Gupta period. Especially striking was the similarity between the ornamental bricks from Ahichhatrā, in particular those known to have come from ACI, with those adorning the pilasters and friezes of the temple at Bhītargāon. Using this comparative approach, it proved possible to understand the function, or possible range of functions, that each of the recorded ornamental bricks from Ahichhatrā would have had, with the majority of them belonging to pilasters, doorframes, door lintels and friezes, the latter being located on the walls or *śikhara* of a temple, or alternatively on the walls of the platform(s) or plinth of a temple.

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[9] Shrimali, *History of Pañcāla*, p. 150.

The Bhītargāon Temple

Besides contributing to knowledge on terraced temple architecture in the subcontinent, the thesis also advanced scholarship on the Bhītargāon temple and the previously unpublished brick and stone ruins at Khanderia. My study of the former temple was aided not only by the relatively substantial body of reports and scholarship on the subject, but also by Joseph Beglar's photographs taken in 1878 following the 'discovery' of the temple by Cunningham. These images show the monument before it underwent repair, restoration, conservation and further erosion, and thus are extremely valuable historical documents. The photographs reveal that, by the late nineteenth century, the brick facing of the temple below the level of the pilasters on each wall was lost, possibly owing to brick theft. Thus, the reconstruction of the base is unlikely to be true to the original design. Other details, no longer extant, are observable in the images; small *candraśālās* of different shapes, for example, were originally located along the *kapotas*. Based on the formal qualities of the temple I have proposed that the structure had a double-ended barrel-vaulted roof. The complexity of the temple with its *triratha* plan, tall *śikhara* and upper cell suggest that it is comparable in date to the stone temples of Deogaṛh and Nāchnā Kuṭhārā, which are placed in the late Gupta period.

The Khanderia Temple

An article in *The Hindu* newspaper (January 2012) brought to my attention the Gupta period ruins at Khanderia.[10] Subsequently I visited the site located on a rocky plateau in close proximity to the lush and bountiful Bhimlat Gorge in the Bundi District of Rajasthan, once situated within the kingdom of the Mālavas in Western Mālwa – an area that became a vassal of the Gupta Empire under Samudragupta. To date, the mound has not been excavated, nor has any scholarship been published on the ruins. Hence the site report in Chapter 2 of this thesis, contributes to literature on

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[10] Iqbal.

the field of Gupta period temple architecture. The temple was dedicated to Śiva and contains a fine, though fractured, example of an early Gupta *ekamukhaliṅga* carved from stone quarried only a few metres away; while a stone Nandi lies half buried in the mound. The temple was constructed from brick with stone architectural elements such as doorjambs and steps. The sanctum of the temple was relatively sizeable and most probably had a *maṇḍapa* in its forecourt, and at the very least a Nandi *maṇḍapa*. The height of the mound suggests that the temple was situated on a substantial platform, or even a tiered platform. Interestingly, a piece of one of the doorjambs has been relocated to a *satī* site about 3 km away; it has been carved on the reverse with a depiction of a man and wife, which has been tentatively dated to between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries CE. This tells us that the temple fell into disuse several centuries ago.

Iconographic Conventions in the Gupta Period

The second part of the thesis sought to advance scholarship on the terracotta iconography of the Gupta period with the principle objective being to re-interpret a number of terracotta relief plaques and fragments from Pawāyā and Ahichhatrā. Besides this, many other stone sculptures, reliefs and terracotta plaques were explored in order to better understand some of the manifold iconographic conventions present in Gupta period art.

A semiotic approach can be taken to the study of Gupta art since a well-defined visual language of 'signs' denotes a character, or type of character, mood or action. To name a few examples; spherical, bulging eyes generally denote a demon, a fierce deity such as Bhairava, or an attendant figure. Eyebrows upturned above the bridge of the nose indicate that the character is either a demon, or a god or royal in warrior mode. Bared teeth suggest a demonic figure, while lotus-shaped eyes are usually reserved for gods, goddesses, musicians and celestial beings. A squat figure indicates that the character is a dwarf attendant, a demon, a *yakṣa*, or Vāmana, the dwarf *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. An emaciated body with visible ribs reveals that the character is an ascetic. Motion is often indicated by hair, scarves and earrings flying backwards, and sometimes by heads tilted in opposing directions. Lastly, unless the subject calls for a different arrangement, principle characters are on the whole depicted on the left of an image, while wives and secondary characters are shown on the right. Despite this well-developed visual language, it is evident that the Gupta period was a hotbed of creative experimentation. Singular representations of myths exist, for example, that were either unique or never really took root. One such example is the striking illustration on the *toraṇa* lintel from Pawāyā, which depicts the birth of Kārttikeya who stands nude at the centre of the composition surrounded by the six Kṛttikās holding reeds. To the best of my knowledge, this is the only surviving image to depict the birth of the god in this manner. Also noteworthy is the fascinating plaque from Ahichhatrā, probably dating to the later half of the Gupta period, depicting the Kṛttikās standing on a chariot surrounded by an orb representing the moon god, Candra.

It is apparent that as Sanskritic Brahmanism became more prevalent during the Gupta period, the 'folkish' divinities, or even 'folkish' manifestations of certain deities such as Kārttikeya, became less and less significant. At Pawāyā, for instance, *yakṣas* held quite a strong presence on the terraced Viṣṇu monument, but aside from the popular pot-bellied god of wealth, Kubera, *yakṣas* are less prominent at other, later Gupta temples. At Ahichhatrā, the worship of lesser divinities alongside important Brahmanical deities is conspicuous. On the platform unearthed at ACV, for example, numerous terracotta sculptures were found, some depicting familiar goddesses such as Mahiṣāsuramardinī. However, many of the sculptures portray a three-headed female who has tentatively been identified as Ṣaṣṭhī by Srinivasan.[11] This goddess seems to have been influential in the region, as another image of her has been found at Faridpur, also in the Bareilly District. The sculptures from ACV have been dated by Agrawala to the early post-Gupta period, although, according to style, it has been suggested in this thesis that in all probability they were Kuṣāṇa in date.[12] These goddesses, along with many other deities and divinities represented at Ahichhatrā – especially at sites ACIII and ACV – were invoked with the intention of protecting worshippers from disease, battle, infertility of land and people, problematic pregnancy and childbirth. In contrast, I have argued that the deities and myths

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[11] Srinivasan, p. 333.

[12] Agrawala, *Terracotta Figurines*, p. 68.

represented on the terraced monument ACI are more abstract in nature, with the overriding theme being that of self-mastery. Although these subjects would have been ideally suited to a Pāśupata temple, as discussed in Chapter 5, without further evidence coming to light we are not able to establish whether this temple was definitely Pāśupata in nature or whether it was affiliated to a less demanding and more popular branch of Śaivism.

A Re-discovered Hoard of Plaques?

Another contribution of this thesis is the compilation of several terracotta plaques located in museums and private collections across the globe, which, based on style, can be said to have derived from the same temple. Despite the striking resemblance between the panels, their shared origin has never been acknowledged. The majority of the plaques are fragmented, but some of them have retained short Brāhmī inscriptions dating to the Gupta period, most of which have not yet been deciphered. Some of the plaques can be identified as illustrating myths from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It has been very tentatively proposed in this thesis that the site of an illegal excavation of Gupta period mounds in Katingra, District Etah in Uttar Pradesh, might have been the original home of these plaques. This theory is based on a brief mention made by Ajai Shankar about several inscribed Gupta period plaques depicting tales from the *Rāmāyaṇa* that went missing from Katingra. Further research is needed on these fascinating panels as a group. Moreover, other collections of Gupta period terracotta plaques, such as those hailing from Nachar Khera, deserve to be analysed in depth and presented as a group.

Iconography from Pawāyā

Numerous fragments belonging to terracotta relief panels were unearthed during excavation of the Pawāyā monument, but apart from a cursory attempt by Rekha Morris to describe some of the themes depicted in these fragments, the terracottas have received little scrutiny. In Chapter 10 of the thesis, I undertook to piece together some of the myths or themes illustrated in these reliefs. The conclusion was reached that among the characters and stories depicted was the Viṣṇu Anantaśayana; Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Hanūmāna, possibly engaged in battle with Rāvaṇa’s armies; Mahiṣāsuramardinī; a seated Durgā, and possibly Pralamba and Balarāma. None of these themes is particularly unusual in the Gupta period. In addition, several male and female busts survive and were probably situated within *candraśālās* as at Bhītargāon, Ajaṇṭā and elsewhere.

Many early Gupta period stone sculptures also survive from Pawāyā and while the identity of most of the figures represented is evident, some of the sculptures have presented more of a challenge and have been given a new reading here. Most puzzling was the pillar capital depicting addorsed Vaiṣṇava figures. Two other such pillar capitals survive, at Eraṇ and in Patna, but the characters have a different appearance. At Eraṇ, Viṣṇu’s winged vehicle, Garuḍa, is depicted, while the dancing characters on the Patna pillar capital have been identified as Cakrapuruṣas. Likewise, based on the iconography of the addorsed figures from Pawāyā, and on a process of eliminating other previously suggested candidates, the tentative conclusion was reached that the sculptures might also represent Cakrapuruṣas – the personification of Viṣṇu’s destructive weapon, the *cakra* or discus. If this interpretation is correct, then it would have represented a powerful message on the behalf of the Guptas towards any would-be opponents.

Arguably the most fascinating find from Pawāyā, was a substantial stone lintel fragment from a gateway, which was probably fairly similar in form to those magnificent examples at Sāñcī. The lintel is carved on both sides with reliefs illustrating myths involving a number of Viṣṇu’s *avatāras*, but despite its interesting subject matter it has never been explored at length. One face of the lintel is rather fascinating as it seems to depict the terraced temple but in a celestial setting, essentially serving to bring the temple to life, and moreover to endow it with a significance of cosmic proportions.

Terracotta Plaques from Ahichhatrā ACI

A significant contribution in this thesis is the re-reading of a number of important plaques from ACI, which, to the best of my knowledge, represent the largest extant collection of panels surviving from a Gupta period brick Śiva temple. Two of the plaques – namely those depicting the sacrifice of Dakṣa – have been correctly identified by Agrawala. Interestingly, the plaques vividly represent the earliest surviving depiction of this myth described in the *Mahābhārata*, and are thus highly significant. On the basis of attributes and physical characteristics I was able to tentatively identify a number of figures in one of these plaques, among them the fearsome deities Caṇḍeśa and Vīrabhadra.

A plaque previously identified as depicting Śiva Daksiṇāmūrtī has been interpreted here as representing Sage Nārāyaṇa. This reading was based on a comparison with other relief depictions of the Sages Nara and Nārāyaṇa from the Gupta period, and most notably, with a plaque from Bhītargāon, which depicts the temptation of the sages. Although the panel from ACI is fragmented, I have suggested that Nara was depicted on a bench to the right of Nārāyaṇa. In the lower register of the plaque, several *apsarās* may have been portrayed. The female to the left of Sage Nārāyaṇa is most probably the *apsarā*, Urvaśī. The plaques from ACI and Bhītargāon are the earliest surviving reliefs to illustrate the attempted seduction of Nara and Nārāyaṇa.

A plaque from ACI depicting a four-armed male figure with a third eye, holding a *triśūla*, and bearing a deceased buffalo demon slung over his shoulders, was identified by Agrawala as depicting Bhairava. As no myth survives pairing Bhairava with a buffalo demon, this character has tentatively been interpreted here as Nīlalohita, who is Rudra in the form of a *gaṇa*. In a myth told in the *Skandapurāṇa*, Nīlalohita slays a buffalo demon by the name of Hālāhala. Interestingly, Bisschop discusses how two or three sculptures from the terraced Śiva temple at Mansar might depict Nīlalohita. No other images surviving from the Gupta and Vākāṭaka periods have been identified as portraying this character. Two further plaques from ACI may depict Nīlalohita after committing the ultimate sin of Brahminicide; however, it is equally possible that they represent the almost identical myth involving Bhairava, or Bhikṣāṭanamūrti.

Based on Agrawala's description, a plaque from ACI – the whereabouts of which is unknown – probably depicted the fierce deity Caṇḍeśa or Caṇḍeśvara, rather than the founder of Pāśupata Śaivism, Lakulīśa, as suggested by Agrawala. In 2011, a fascinating plaque was found in the vicinity of ACI, and has not yet been published elsewhere. On the basis of style it can be presumed to have belonged to the terraced temple. It portrays yet another character with a dreadful appearance. This plaque is the only surviving representation of its kind, and may have been unique. The three-headed character breathes fire – specifically three flames which might be an illusion to Agni, the god of the sacrificial fire. The ithyphallic deity has a third eye on each of his foreheads and at least six arms. His pose suggests that he could be trampling on a demon. The conclusion reached in this thesis is that he might represent a Kṣetrapāla (a fierce guardian deity of the fields), or a composite form of Rudra or Śiva and Agni; these suggestions, however, remain open to debate.

Ramachandran has identified the plaque depicting two warriors in combat as representing Yudhiṣṭhira and Jayadratha. Though the warriors have been depicted as identical to one another, each has a flag standard – one with a boar (or possibly a bull), and one with a crescent moon. These emblems are the only means by which the characters might be identified. While the *Mahābhārata* describes Yudhiṣṭhira as carrying a standard with a moon, and Jayadratha, a standard with a boar, the two characters face one another in battle only for a very short time. Thus it would be highly surprising if this relatively insignificant episode had been chosen to adorn ACI. It might be proposed, however, that this plaque could have originally one of a sequence of plaques possibly focusing on the heroism of Arjuna's son, Abhimanyu, and Jayadratha's subsequent death at the hands of Arjuna. Within this context, the choice of Yudhiṣṭhira and Jayadratha in combat as the subject matter for one of the plaques would make more sense.

The final plaque is perhaps the most intriguing of all. It depicts a princely figure riding on the back of a centauress, who wears a chain around her neck – an article which, surprisingly, has never been pointed out before. Despite this encumbrance, she appears to be giving the male figure a loving glance. In the upper right hand corner flies a *vidyādhara*, suggesting that this is an auspicious scene. They have been identified as a *kinnara-mithuna* and as Urvaśī and Purūravas (also known as Vikrama). It is highly unlikely, however, that they represent a frolicking and ambiguous *kinnara-mithuna*; firstly, because the size of the plaque suggests that it was positioned alongside the other panels, all of which represent important deities or well-known myths; and secondly because a garland-bearing *vidyādhara* would be inapposite in a scene depicting a nameless pair of lovers. The identification of Urvaśī and Purūravas is also problematic. On the one hand it was a very popular myth and would also fit in particularly well with the plaque depicting Sage Nārāyaṇa and Urvaśī. On the other hand, a chain is not mentioned in any version of this myth, although this article could potentially be signifying the rescue of the nymph by Purūravas. Nor does the tale explicitly describe Urvaśī as being half-horse; and the prince is never described as journeying on the back of Urvaśī. A more promising – though still problematic – reading of the plaque is that it might represent Saṃjñā and Vivasvant, the latter being the father of Manu, the progenitor of mankind. In the *Harivaṃśa* the goddess Saṃjñā transforms herself into a mare. The myth ends with her husband Vivasvant disguising himself as a stallion and finding Saṃjñā in the field where she was grazing and trying to force himself upon her. She turns her head to look at him and he transforms back into his 'human' form. The image of a male rider on the back of a centauress was popular in early India, and such reliefs have been reported from several sites, including a further two from Ahichhatrā. Most interesting is a stone block from Mathurā depicting this theme on two faces. In these relief carvings it is apparent that the centauress is tugging at a chain around her neck. Moreover, the male rider appears to be carrying a sword or knife. The popularity of this image, coupled with the fact that it does not accurately represent any textual myth known to me, makes it deeply intriguing and certainly worthy of further research.

The terracotta plaques from ACI, including the Gangā and Yamunā sculptures in high relief, have proved problematic to date. This issue has arisen because none of the early brick temples in India have been scientifically dated; and moreover, none of the monuments in a better state of preservation have retained inscriptions. As a result, there is not an established framework by which to date terracottas, and therefore it is quite probable that some terracottas labelled as Gupta are in actuality post-Gupta.

The reliefs and sculptures from ACI are not characteristically Gupta in style, as opposed to a number of other plaques found at Ahichhatrā. Are they then early or pre-Gupta, or post-Gupta? A few of the plaques including the so-called *kinnara-mithuna* and the Nara Nārāyaṇa panels – look stylistically closer in date to the Kuṣāṇa period, although perhaps they have been executed with a little more finesse. This tentatively suggests an early Gupta date for ACI in its first phase, possibly between *circa* 350 and 450 CE. Based on the style of its ornamentation ACII might have been slightly earlier in date than ACI.

A Comparison of Ahichhatrā ACI with the Terraced Monument at Pawāyā

Despite the poor condition of the monuments at Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā, it is possible to determine the following key similarities and differences: the structures at both sites have square platforms, as do the terraced edifices at Mansar. On the other hand, the platforms on terraced Buddhist monuments of the period demonstrate a wide variety of shapes, sometimes creating *maṇḍala*-like forms.

The original Pawāyā structure had only two monumental platforms; later on, a third terrace was added. Since no excavation reports or plans were drawn up for ACI, we cannot be sure that ACI had four levels including the plinth from the outset. The monument underwent expansion and renovation, and thus the possibility exists that the current plinth, for example, was a later addition. This might explain why no staircase was found on the east face of the structure leading from the ground level to the first platform. A plan of ACII indicates that the *bhadra* projection on the west face was greatly enlarged at some point.

ACI had staircases on both the east and west. The latter face, though, is severely damaged, and thus the original arrangement of the staircases is not clear. At Pawāyā, no trace was found of the stairs that led from ground level to the first platform. However, we might tentatively conjecture that, as at ACII, there was only one entrance, and that it would have been located on the east face where there is a projection on the second and third platforms and there are traces of subsidiary shrines on the basement platform.

Based on style, the ornamental brickwork on the terraces of the Pawāyā monument is either Kuṣāṇa in date, or has been heavily influenced by the architecture of that era. Moreover, the brickwork does not bear decorative motifs, but was coated in lime plaster. Some fallen ornamental bricks in a similar style to those at Bhītargāon and Ahichhatrā have been found at Pawāyā and may have belonged to the no-longer extant temple that surmounted the terraces. In contrast, there is no indication that stucco or lime plaster was used at Bhītargāon or at Ahichhatrā, though traces of red paint and white plaster have been found on the so-called residential structure at Mansar. Based on the large collection of fallen ornamental bricks, it can be established that the pilasters once adorning the walls of ACI had more in common with those on the temple at Bhītargāon, on the brick Thūl Mīr Rūkan *stūpa* in Pakistan, and possibly at Newal, than with the pilasters at Pawāyā. The only surviving pilaster fragment *in situ* on ACI, though, has a more slender shaft than those at Bhītargāon, and furthermore, no curved *ghaṭa* fragments have been found at Ahichhatrā. It is probable that Bhītargāon is later in date than ACI, and might be considered more advanced architecturally. Interestingly, while Bhītargāon, Newal and Ahichhatrā are all situated along the *Uttarāpatha*, the Thūl Mīr Rūkan *stūpa* is situated 1400 km to the west of the latter site as the crow flies. The distance between the monuments demonstrates how widespread this type of ornamentation was. Moreover, it indicates that there were probably many more brick temples and *stūpa*s with similar ornamental brickwork throughout the northern regions of the subcontinent at this time. Lastly, the possibility certainly exists that the monument at Pawāyā, in its first phase at least, was the proto-type for the Hindu terraced structures at Ahichhatrā, Mansar and later at Aphṣāḍ.

Final Words

With each passing year these important brick monuments suffer further irreversible deterioration through erosion. Moreover, brick and antiquities theft, and well-meaning but often transformative restoration, sometimes accelerate the damage. In addition, numerous early terracottas sit gathering dust in museum collections, for the most part overlooked by scholars. It is thus to be hoped that in the near future, more research will be conducted on brick architecture and terracotta ornamentation of sacred monuments in South Asia belonging to the early and medieval periods.

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Appendices:

Appendix A: Glossary of Sanskrit Terms

abhaya mudrā: gesture made with the right hand bestowing fearlessness.

abhiṣeka: a devotional ritual.

ācārya: a teacher in religious matters.

adhiṣṭhāna: a moulded base.

aiḍuka: similar in form to a funerary monument (see *eḍūka*) but without containing mortuary remains.

Ājīvikas: an ascetic sect.

akshamālā: a rosary.

āmalaka: an architectural element that represents the ribbed seed of the amala fruit (Indian gooseberry). The *āmalaka* often crowns the tower of a North Indian temple.

āmalasāraka: a broader version of an *āmalaka*.

amṛita ghaṭa: a pot carrying nectar.

añjalimudrā: placing the palms together in a gesture of respect or worship.

antarāla: entry vestibule.

antarālaya: corridors within a temple.

antarapaṭṭa: a broad recess.

apsarā: a celestial nymph.

ardhamaṇḍapa: the porch of a temple.

āśrama: a hermitage.

asura: a demon.

aśvamēdha: a royal ritual involving an elaborate horse sacrifice.

avatāra: an incarnation.

āyaka: platforms protruding from the base of a *stūpa*.

āyudhapuruṣa: the personified weapons of Viṣṇu.

balīpiṭha: an offering altar.

bāṇa-liṅga: an ovoid stone from a river bed (especially the Narmada) which is worshipped as a sign of Śiva.

bhadra: a central wall projection, usually found on a cardinal axis.

bhadrapīṭha: a platform.

bhiṭṭa: a course of a plinth.

bhūmi or *bhūmikā*: a level or storey on a North Indian temple.

Brāhmī: a script used in the subcontinent and in parts of Central Asia in the last centuries BCE and in the first few centuries CE.

caitya: a barrel-vaulted temple or hall of worship.

cakra: a discus – a weapon of Viṣṇu.

cakrapuruṣa: the personified form of Viṣṇu's discus.

cakravartin: wheel turner, a term sometimes used to describe Viṣṇu, and sometimes a king who has expanded his territory in the four directions.

candraśālā: a half-moon shaped dormer window or an architectural element representing a dormer window.

caturmukha: four-faced.

caturmukhaliṅga: a *liṅga* with four faces of Śiva in his various manifestations depicted emerging from it.

chādya: eave canopy.

chandrakālā: a crescent moon, sometimes depicted in the hair of Śiva and Pārvatī.

chhannavīra: a cross belt.

citrā vīṇā: a stringed instrument.

dānavas: a race of demons.

daityas: a race of demons.

daśāvatāra: the ten incarnations (or sometimes part incarnations) of Viṣṇu.

dasyus: enemies.

deva: a god.

devī: a goddess.

dhotī: a lower garment for men.

Drāviḍa: the mainstream mode of temple architecture in South India.

dvārapāla: a door guardian.

eḍūka: a funerary monument.

ekamukhaliṅga: a *liṅga* (see below) with one face of Śiva emerging from it.

ekāvalī: a necklace formed of a single string of pearls (check).

gadā: a mace – an attribute of Viṣṇu.

Gadādevī: the personified form of Viṣṇu's mace.

gaṇa: a dwarf attendant of Śiva.

gandhakuṭī: a simple shelter with three walls and a flat roof provided for an image of the Buddha or a Bodhisattva in the early centuries CE.

gandharva: a celestial musician.

garbhagṛha: the inner sanctum of a temple.

gavākṣa: a dormer window or an architectural element representing a dormer window (also called *candraśālā*).

ghaṭa: a pot, or a (sometimes loose) representation of a pot on pilasters and columns.

guṇa: a quality, such as truth.

harmikā: a small square platform at the pinnacle of a *stūpa* dome.

havana-kund: a pit for performing a fire-sacrifice.

iṣṭadēvatā: the chosen, preferred or most cherished deity.

jagatī: the footing or base moulding of the plinth of a temple.

jaṅghā: the wall proper of a temple.

jaṭās: matted locks.

jātaka: an extensive collection of tales about the previous lives and adventures of the Buddha.

jaṭāmukuṭa: matted locks worn in a topknot.

kapāla: a skull.

kapōta: a roll cornice.

kapōtapālī: a cornice moulding.

kakshyābandha: a band which runs horizontally along the body of a horse or centaur(ess).

karṇāṇḍakas: corner spirelet.

karṇa: mouldings.

khaṇḍa: segment; for example, a segment or part of a book.

Kharōṣṭhī: an ancient Gandhāran script.

kinnara: a celestial being who is half human usually with the lower body of a bird or horse.

kinnarī: a female celestial being who is half human usually with the lower body of a bird or horse.

kirātā: a hunter.

kīrttimukha: lion head motif.

kirīṭa mukuṭa: a conical-shaped crown.

kṣetrapāla: a fierce guardian deity of the fields or local area.

kṛttikās: The wives of the seven seers, and also the Pleiades, a constellation of stars.

kumbha: a pot and an important architectural element found, for the example, at the base of a column or pilaster.

kūṭa: a square domed aedicule.

lalitāsana: a sitting pose, with one foot on the ground and one leg folded at the knee with the foot pressed against the opposite thigh.

latā: a verticle 'creeper' or offset along the central spine of a temple.

liṅga or *liṅgaṃ*: a phallic-shaped 'sign' of Śiva.

lokapālas: the deities of the directions.

māhajanapada: a great realm, one of sixteen kingdoms that existed in ancient India in the last few centuries BCE.

mahāvihāra: an important Buddhist monastery.

mahārājādhirāja: an epithet which means 'supreme king of great kings.'

makara: a mythical composite creature, often half fish and half mammal or crocodile.

maṇḍala: a ritual symbol or formation which represents the universe, often contained within a circle.

maṇḍapa: a hall.

mātṛkā: the mother goddesses.

mithuna: a loving couple.

mṛdaṇga: a type of drum.

mudrā: a gesture.

nāga: a serpent divinity.

nāginī: a female serpent divinity.

Nāgara: the mainstream mode of temple architecture in North India.

nakṣatra: Lunar mansion in Vedic astrology.

navaranga: nine bays.

pañcāyatana: a temple plan with a central shrine having a subsidiary shrine in alignment with each of its four corners.

paramabhāgavataḥ: a worshipper of Viṣṇu.

paraśu: an axe.

parinirvāṇa: release from the cycle of death and re-birth.

phāṃsanā: a mode of temple architecture with a tiered roof.

potikā: a bracket.

pradakṣiṇa-patha: a circumambulatory pathway around a sacred structure or icon.

prāsāda: a palace.

prakṛti: the principles of the universe.

praśasti: a panegyric.

pratimā: image.

pūrṇa ghaṭa: an overflowing vessel, often depicted on the capital of a column or pilaster.

pustakāra: a sculptor in clay.

purāṇas: Sanskrit texts on the Hindu deities.

rājā: a prince.

rajas: the state of action.

rākṣasa: a demon.

ṛṣi: a sage or seer.

rūpakaṇṭha: a floral, ornamental or figurative frieze on a temple.

sādhaka: the follower of a religious practice.

Śakti: the female principle of the divine.

śālā: a building with a barrel-vaulted roof.

śālabañjika: A female tree spirit who represents fertility.

Saṃmitīya: a school of Buddhism.

saṅghārāma: a dwelling for a monastic Buddhist community.

śaṅkha: a conch shell.

saptaṛṣis: the seven seers.

sarpa-bandha: entwined snakes.

śāstra: a manual on any subject, for example, boat building or painting.

satī: self-immolation.

satti-satta plaque: a plaque marking the event of a self-immolation.

sattva: the quality or state of truth.

śikhara: the tower or spire of a temple.

śiṣya: a pupil of a religious preceptor.

stūpa: a dome-shaped Buddhist reliquary monument.

sudarśana cakra: Viṣṇu’s discus.

tāla: a storey.

tālavṛnta: a palm leaf fan.

tamas: the quality or state of darkness and delusion.

toraṇa: a gateway.

triśūla: the trident carried by Śiva.

triśikhin: hair arranged in to three tufts, characteristic of the god Skanda.

triratha: double recessed corners on a temple.

uttara: beam.

valabhī: a type of temple with a barrel-vaulted roof.

valkala: tree bark sometimes worn by ascetics.

vanamāla: a long garland.

vedībandha: foundation block or socle above plinth.

vedikā: railings.

vihāra: a Buddhist monastery.

vimāna: the tower of a temple in the *Drāviḍa* (South Indian) mode of architecture.

vīnā: a stringed instrument.

yajña: a Hindu sacrificial ritual.

yakṣa: a male nature spirit or tutelary deity.

yakṣī or *yaksiṇī*: a female nature spirit or tutelary deity.

yaṣṭi: round or square pillars or poles.

yogapaṭṭa: a strap used to keep posture in meditation.

yoni: representation of the female genitals, symbolic of the *Śakti* or consort of Śiva.

Appendix B: Summaries of Terraced Monuments

Introduction

Each of the extant terraced structures located within the Indian subcontinent will be summarised here, with the exception of those at Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā, which are explored at length in the main body of the thesis. The aim here is to provide a general outline of each monument, including contextual information such as location, date of excavation(s), where possible the names of the archaeologists involved, and, in certain cases, historical data. Significant findings will be noted, as well as a basic discussion of architectural form. It will shortly become evident that hitherto most of the structures included in this subchapter have received little or no scholarly consideration. The depth of analysis for each summary is thus heavily reliant on the availability of information, archaeological records, epigraphic evidence, how much has survived from any given structure and what is known of the historical context.

Mohenjodaro: Site 1

The area designated as Site 1 in the ancient citadel of Mohenjodaro, located in the Sindh province of Pakistan, is home to a large rectangular pyramidal burnt brick monument.[1] Crowning the terraces are the ruins of a drum or dome-like hollow structure built from sun-baked bricks.[2] This is usually identified as a Kuṣāṇa period Buddhist *stūpa*.[3] Giovanni Verardi and Frederica Barba argue that the terraces, however, are much earlier than the crowning structure, and might date to the Late Mature Harappan period (1900-1300 BCE).[4]

Thousands of Indus period pointed clay urns were found in the areas surrounding the terraced structure. Sir John Marshall identified these as post-cremation pots,[5] but

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[1] Excavations have been carried out at the site by R. D. Banerji in 1922; and by John Marshall, Ernest Mackay and K. N. Diksit in the 1930s.

[2] Verardi and Barba, p. 149.

[3] Sir Mortimer Wheeler, *The Indus Civilization: Supplementary Volume to the Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 37.

[4] Verardi and Barba, p. 167.

[5] Ibid., p. 151.

Verardi and Barba have convincingly suggested that they are more likely to be votive offerings.[6]

> The importance of the rituals connected to the pointed vessels is also pointed out by the seals. Terracotta tablet M 478 shows on one side a man offering what looks like a pointed vessel to tree. On the other face of the tablet, a horned goddess protects the tree from a tiger and from two men who are uprooting the tree. On Seal M 1186, the same goddess is shown standing on a papal tree, while a kneeled (*sic*) man offers her an animal. The ritual including the offering of vessels as documented on the seals seems to correspond well to the evidence from Site 1, because the pointed vessels contained fragments of bones.[7]

The presence of so many votive vessels close to the terraced monument tentatively suggests that the structure might have had a religious function from the outset, although no decorative architectural elements or sculptures alluding to the purpose of the monument have been found.[8]

A three-dimensional computer-generated reconstruction of the monument by Veneroso depicts the structure as having six terraces composed of a plinth, topped by three shallow stepped platforms and two taller platforms with wide passageways.[9] All of the staircases are situated on the eastern side of the monument.[10]

Chandavaram

In 1965-6, B.R. Prasad discovered an early historic *stūpa* situated on a hillock known as Singarakonda, in a scenic position on the right bank of the meandering River Gundlakamme in Chandavaram, Prakasam District, Andhra Pradesh. To the east of the site he found a further *stūpa* and four apsidal *caityas* situated on hills.[11] Excavation of the former *stūpa* began in 1972 under the supervision of Mohd. Abdul Waheed Khan.[12]

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[6] Ibid., p. 156.
[7] Ibid., p. 156.
[8] Ibid., p. 148.
[9] See ibid., p. 164.
[10] Ibid., p. 156.
[11] *Indian Archaeology 1965-66, A Review*, ed. by A. Ghosh (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1973), p. 4.
[12] *Indian Archaeology 1972-73, A Review*, ed. M. N. Deshpande (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1978), p. 3.

The *stūpa* measures 40 m in diameter and has *āyaka* platforms facing in the cardinal directions.[13] The relatively well-preserved brick built[14] structure is composed of two terraces, coping, an outer railing, *pradakṣiṇa-patha*, a dome and a *harmikā*.[15] There are stairs leading from the second terrace to the *vihāra*.[16] The drum of the *stūpa* was expanded twice, with the intermittent space between drums filled with rubble.[17] The monument dates in its first phase to around the second century CE and in its last phase to *circa* the first or second century CE. It should be noted that the structure has recently undergone extensive renovation work in a bid to attract tourists to the site.

Several relief panels were discovered depicting subjects such as the birth of Buddha, the worship of the Bodhi tree, *Dharma-cakra*, *stūpa*,[18] lions, bulls, and winged creatures.[19] According to the archaeologists, 'since the image of Buddha is conspicuously absent, the art seems to show close resemblance to the first phase of Amaravati,'[20] dating to approximately the second century BCE. Coins of the Sātavāhana ruler, Yajna Sri Satakarni (167-196 CE) were found during excavation work.[21] As an aside, the Chandavaram *stūpa* has repeatedly been targeted by looters who have removed several of its large carved stone slabs.[22]

Rajgir

In the vicinity of the well-known cylindrical Gupta period temple, Maniyār Maṭh, in Rajgir, district Baḍgāon, Bihar, sits a ruined terraced structure which archaeologists have identified as a *stūpa*, although there is little surviving evidence to support this identification.[23] As a matter of interest, Cunningham in his survey report on Rajgir, or

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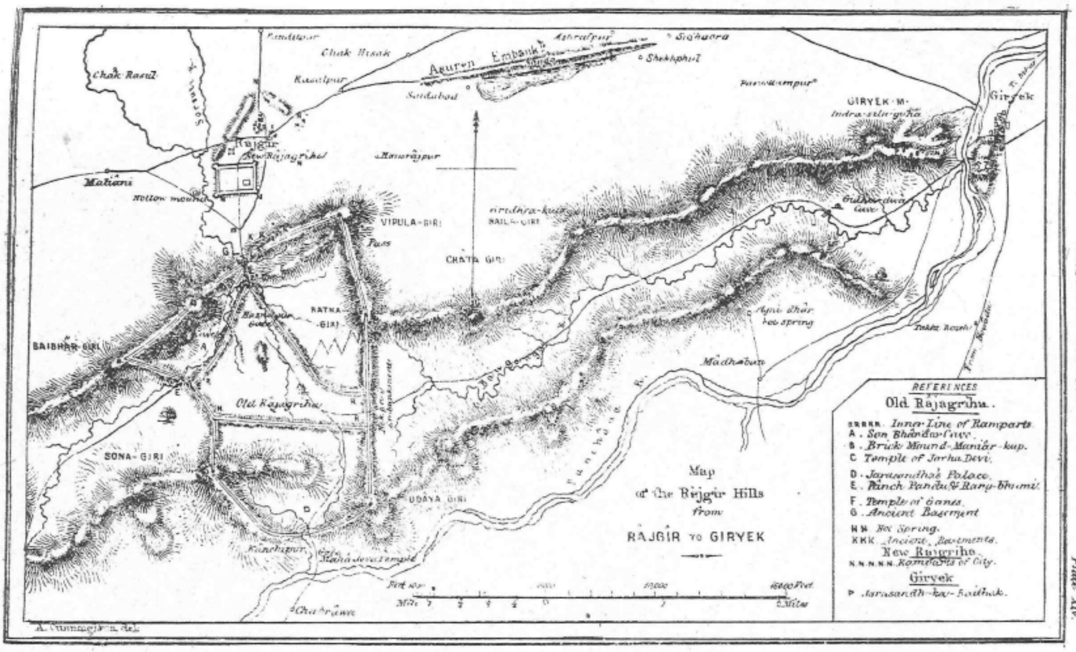
[13] Ibid., p. 3.
[14] *Indian Archaeology 1973-74 - A Review*, ed. by B. K. Thapar (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1979), p. 7.
[15] Ibid., p. 3.
[16] Ibid., p. 7.
[17] *Indian Archaeology 1974-75 - A Review*, ed. by B. K. Thapar (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1979), p. 6.
[18] *Indian Archaeology 1972-73, A Review,* p. 3.
[19] *Indian Archaeology 1973-74 - A Review*, p. 7.
[20] *Indian Archaeology 1972-73, A Review,* p. 3.
[21] *Indian Archaeology 1975-76 - A Review*, ed. by B. K. Thapar (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1979), p. 3.
[22] Jenny Doole, 'In the News', *Culture Without Context, The Newsletter of the Illicit Antiquities Research Centre*, 9 (2001), pp. 16-24 (p. 16).
[23] *Indian Archaeology 1999-2000 – A Review*, ed. by C. Babu Rajeev (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2005), p. 15.

ancient Rājagriha, writes, 'I cannot … discover in the accounts of Fa-Hian and Hwen Thsang any mention of a stupa inside the walls of old Rājagriha' (Fig. A1).[24]



A1. Cunningham's plan of Rajgir.[25]

The mound, located 200 m north of the west gate of the ancient city was excavated in between 1999 and 2000 by K. K. Muhammed, D. K. Ambastha, D. K. Singh, N. K. Sinha, J. K. Tiwari, S. P. Gupta and O. P. Pandey.[26] A ruined two-tiered terraced monument was uncovered, with the base of an apsidal structure located on the western side of the upper terrace. The base of the monument measures 29 x 25 m, and is 1.96 m in height. Buttress walls are situated at intervals of between 1.95 m and 3 m. Based on the construction method of most terraced structures in the subcontinent, these buttresses are probably remnants of brick boxes that would have been filled with rubble. Indeed, the upper terrace is described as having 'brick chambers filled with stone and earth.'[27] The apsidal structure is well defined and measures 13.2 x 2.4 m.[28] The monument has been dated to the Maurya, or pre-Maurya, period based on northern black polished ware potsherds discovered there, which could in theory pre-date the structure.

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[24] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 27.
[25] Ibid., Plate XIV.
[26] *Indian Archaeology 1999-2000 – A Review*, ed. by C. Babu Rajeev (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2005), p. 11.
[27] Ibid., p. 15.
[28] Ibid., p. 15.

Sphola

The Sphola *stūpa*, dates from the 2nd to 5th centuries CE, and is located in a spectacular position on an outcrop overlooking the Khyber Pass near Jamrud, Pakistan. The monument retains part of its *stūpa* dome and is situated upon a square triple-tiered base. A photograph from 1878 shows pilasters on the walls of the second platform (Fig. 3.8). Owing to its sweeping views over the Khyber Pass, in recent years the Sphola *stūpa* has become a checkpoint for the Frontier Constabulary.[29]

Uttarasena's *stūpa* at Shankardār/ Shingardar

BUDDHIST STUPA AT
SHANKARDAR, NEAR
GHALEGAI.

A2. Hobday's sketch of the Uttarasena's stūpa at Shankardār/ Shingardar, 1897.[30]

The *stūpa* at Shingardar is located about three kilometres from the village of Barikot, in Swāt, Pakistan. This village has been identified as the location of ancient

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[29] Khan, Hidayat, 'What Little Remains: History Fades as Second Century Sphola Stupa Continues to Crumble', *The Express Tribune*, 17 May 2014. <http://tribune.com.pk/story/709369/what-little-remains-history-fades-as-second-century-sphola-stupa-continues-to-crumble/>

[30] Edmund Arthur Ponsonby Hobday, *Sketches on Service During the Indian Frontier Campaigns of 1897* (London: James Bowden, 1898), p. 61.

Bazira, besieged by Alexander the Great.[31] A brief mention is made of the *stūpa* by Major Edmund Hobday in *Sketches on Service During the Indian Frontier Campaigns of 1897*.[32] His description is accompanied by a watercolour painting of the *stūpa* (Fig. A2). This is the earliest visual record of the monument and shows it to be in better condition than it was when visited by Aurel Stein over twenty years later. In contrast to Hobday who describes the *stūpa* as being in a state of excellent preservation, Stein found it in a poor condition possibly due to its location next to a highway. He writes that the entire village of Shankardār (Shingardar) is constructed from materials removed from the ancient monument.[33] The *stūpa* no longer looks terraced but it was originally situated on at least two platforms.[34]

> All around the two lower bases not only the well-carved facing stones but also the greater portion of the interior masonry had been removed. Through what remained of the lowest base the Bādshāh's new road had been cut. The havoc thus wrought made it impossible to determine the dimensions of the ground plan; on the other hand the destruction of the bases seems to increase the impression created by the height of the Stūpa.[35]

The structure from road level up to the pinnacle of the dome measures approximately 27.4 m. Stein describes the *stūpa* as being similar in design to that at Amluk-Dara. He writes that both *stūpas* have white facing slabs with pilasters carved from black rock.[36] According to Stein, Xuanzang attributes this *stūpa* to Uttarasena, an ancient ruler of Swāt. Moreover, legend relates that a portion of the Buddha's relics are enshrined in this *stūpa*, as requested by the Buddha himself before he entered into Nirvāṇa.[37]

Worthy of note is a rock carving found by Stein about a kilometre away from the *stūpa*. Stein writes:

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[31] (eds.) Evert Barger and Philip Wright, *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India No. 64 - Excavations in Swat and Explorations In Oxus Territories of Afghanistan, 1938* (Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1941), p. 10.

[32] Hobday, p. 60.

[33] Stein, *On Alexander's Track*, p. 49.

[34] Ibid., p. 49.

[35] Ibid., p. 49.

[36] Ibid., p. 49.

[37] Ibid., p. 50.

> I was shown a remarkable relievo carved from the rock. The group, about four feet high altogether, had also suffered from iconoclast hands. But in the middle, on a pedestal supported by lions, I could still clearly recognize a bearded figure standing, flanked on either side by smaller much damaged relievo images. The flame halo rising from the shoulders and the dress of the central figure leave no doubt that a royal personage is intended. The costume comprises a long coat falling over bulging trousers stuck into top-boots, and a kind of pelisse or mantle hanging from the shoulders. It is of distinct interest; for it shows such close resemblance to the dress in which the Indo-Scythian rulers of the great Kushān dynasty are represented on their coins and rare sculptures that the relievo is clearly of approximately contemporary origin.[38]

Top-Dara

The *stūpa* is located near the town of Haibat-Grām in the Top-Dara valley of Lower Swāt. Stein visited the site during his 1926 tour of the region (Fig. A3). He describes how the *stūpa* is situated on a plateau between two torrent beds.[39] The plateau has been enlarged with stone platforms and walling, some of which survives to a height of 3.6 m. The *stūpa* is described as being typical of those found in Swāt, with a stepped pyramidal base. The rectangular base platform measures 15.8 by 14 m, and 4 m in height; this is topped by a circular platform measuring 11.1 m in diameter, and 2.1 m in height; and a second circular platform measuring and 8.6 m in diameter and 1.8 m in height. Each of the terraces has a low plinth of its own. The drum of the *stūpa* measures 8.2 m in diameter suggesting that there was no circumambulatory path on the uppermost platform. At the time of Stein's visit the top of the dome was broken, and he estimates that its original height must have exceeded 6 m. The base platform has stairs on the southeast side measuring 3.9 m in width. All of the bases are adorned with narrow pilasters only 30 cm in width and 7.6 cm in depth. Most of the pilasters, constructed from small stones, are lost. The drum and dome of the *stūpa* is more solid, having been built from large stone slabs with 'small flat pieces of stone filling

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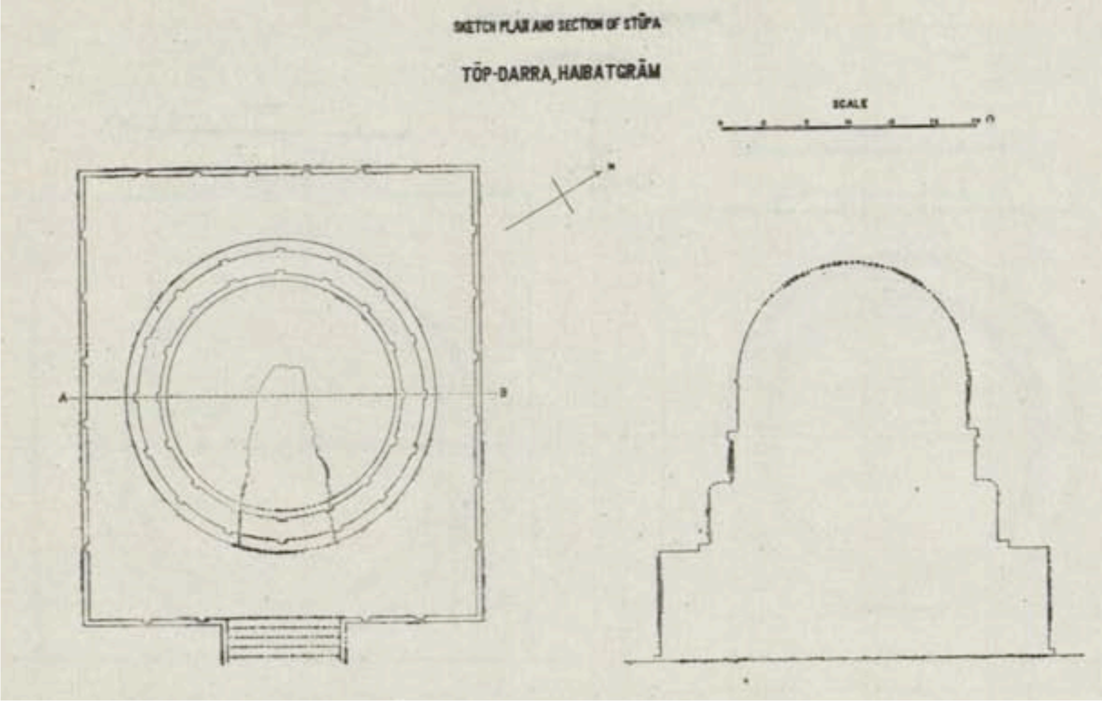
[38] Ibid., p. 51.

[39] Aurel Stein, *An Archaeological Tour in Upper Swāt and Adjacent Hill Tracts*, *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India No. 42 – An Archaeological Tour in Upper Swāt and Adjacent Hill Tracts* (Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1998, 1st edn 1930), p. 7.

the lateral interstices in the usual Gandhāra fashion and equalizing the courses.'[40] The entire *stūpa* was once coated in plaster. To the southeast of the *stūpa* Stein found the ruins of what he believed to be a small monastery. Approximately 60 m above the site Stein found a large tower, which he interpreted as being a refuge for the monastic community in times of need.[41]



A3. Stein's drawings of the Tōp-Dara stūpa.[42]

Tokar-Dara

Approximately 5.6 km west from the village of Barikot is the white stone Tokar-Dara *stūpa* visited by Stein in 1926 (Fig. A4). The *stūpa* is situated on a triple-tiered base with the lowermost platform measuring 20.1 by 20.7 m. The second platform is square, and the upper platform, circular. The *stūpa* drum is 10.6 m in diameter. The dome is hemispherical but in poor condition and Stein was unable to estimate its height. The drum has two narrow cornices composed of vertical stone slabs. The drum and dome are further decorated with black stone pilasters. On the east side of the base platform is a flight of steps, 2.4 m in width. The ruins of a large monastic complex are

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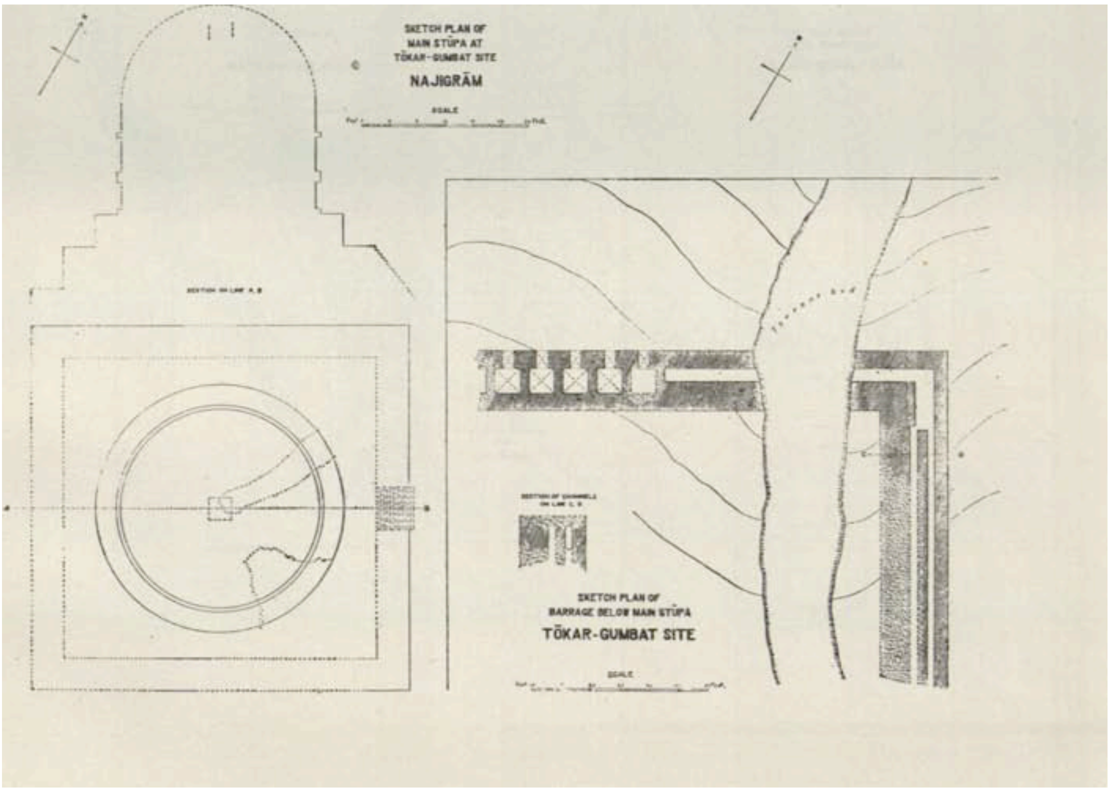
[40] Ibid., p. 7.
[41] Ibid., p. 7.
[42] Ibid., Plate 1.

located to the south of the *stūpa*.[43] Inside the walled enclosure of the monastery are the ruins of a second terraced structure with two surviving platforms. Stein informs us that he was unable to find the ruins of a *stūpa* here, however, he did find a niche in the north face of one of the terraces, containing a relief panel depicting the Buddha with a smaller figure carrying a *vajra*.[44]

Below the *stūpa* is a massive ancient stone barrage constructed to protect the area from powerful torrents of water, as well as to store water in a reservoir.[45] At least two further badly damaged *stūpas* are located at this site.[46]



A4. Stein's drawings of the Tōkar-Dara stūpa.[47]

Gumbatūna

The *stūpa* is located on a plateau on the right bank of the Swāt River near the village of Gumbatūna. Stein describes the *stūpa* as being similar to Top-dara in size

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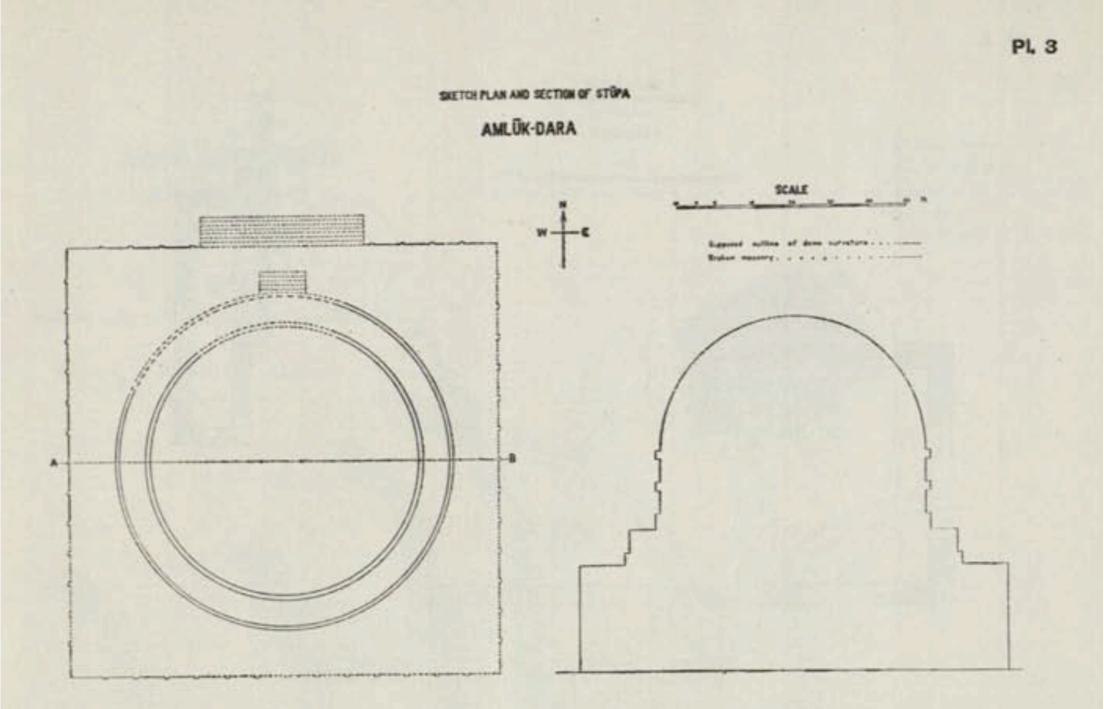
[43] Ibid., p. 15.
[44] Ibid., pp. 15-16.
[45] Ibid., pp. 16-17.
[46] Ibid., pp. 15-18.
[47] Ibid., Plate 3.

and style.[48] The monument has a substantial square base topped by a narrow circular platform or first drum. The base measures 17 m on each side and 3.90 m in height. On the east is a large offset with a staircase, 3.71 m in length and 3.82 m in width.

Shināsī

The large-scale Shināsī *Stūpa* is located above the village of Guligrām near Saidu in Pakistan. Stein visited the monument and commented on its good state of preservation.[49]

Amluk-Dara



A5. Stein's drawings of the Amluk-Dara stūpa.[50]

A stone *stūpa* situated on a triple-tiered base is located in an area of outstanding natural beauty at Amluk-Dara near the village of Nawagai on Mount Elum, Swāt, in northwest Pakistan. The *stūpa* was first reported by Aurel Stein who described it as being in better condition than any other early *stūpa* he had come across, untouched by treasure seekers or iconoclasts (Fig. A5).[51] Stein reports the large hemispherical dome

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[48] Stein, *On Alexander's Track*, p. 26.
[49] Ibid., p. 73.
[50] Stein, *An Archaeological Tour*, Plate 3.
[51] Stein, *On Alexander's Track*, p. 34.

as being about 21 m in diameter, and at that time still with most of its outer facing intact. Together the drum and dome rise to a height of around 14.6 m with the pyramidal base being of about equal height; thus the structure is an impressive 30 m tall without the *harmikā*. The base platform measures 34.4 m square. Four fallen stone umbrellas were found next to the monument, the largest measuring 4.2 m in diameter. As Stein remarks, it would have required a veritable feat of engineering to install such a substantial umbrella on the dome. Behind the *stūpa* were six small mounds, probably enveloping votive *stūpas* or temples.[52] Stein dates the monument to the Kuṣāṇa period based on a large number of copper coins found on the hillsides around the site.[53]

Śrāvastī: Kacchi Kuṭi

The ancient ruins of Śrāvastī or Maheth are situated 20 km from Balrampur, Sravastinagar District, in northeast Uttar Pradesh. The city was once located within ancient Kosala. The crescent-shaped ramparts of the city are 5.23 km in circumference.[54] The ruins are extensive and archaeological findings suggest that Śrāvastī was probably once the most important centre in the southern foothills of the Himalayas.[55] The ancient city is most famous for having been the home of the Buddha for many years.

The most notable ruined structure within the walls of Maheth is the Kacchi Kuṭi, also known as Ananthapindika's *stūpa*. It consists of two receding platforms surrounded by an enclosure wall. The structure has a long staircase leading from the ground level to the upper terrace. The earliest phase of the structure dates to around the second century CE, with renovations continuing up until the twelfth century. Kacchi Kuṭi is believed to have started out as a Buddhist *stūpa*, and later, during the

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[52] Ibid., p. 34.

[53] Ibid., p. 32.

[54] Takahiro Takahashi, Taizo Yamaoka, Fumitaka Yoneda and Akinori Uesugi, 'The Ancient City of Sravasti: its Significance on the Urbanisation of North India', *Purātattva*, 30 (1999-2000), pp. 74-92 (p. 74).

[55] Ibid., p. 79.

Gupta period, been converted to a Hindu shrine. Numerous Gupta period terracotta plaques depicting scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* were found on this monument.[56]

Śrāvastī: Pakki Kuṭi

Pakki Kuṭi is located 121 m to the east of Kaccha-Kuṭi in Maheth (Śrāvastī).[57] It is a large ruined brick structure built on a rectangular plan with at least three terraces. It is thought to have been a *stūpa*, although no trace of a dome survives. The earliest phase of construction is datable to the Kuṣāṇa period.

Naṅdangarh

A6. Google Earth image of the Naṅdangarh stūpa.

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[56] *Sravasti* (Archaeological Survey of India, Lucknow Circle) <http://asilucknowcircle.nic.in/fancybox/pdf/Sravasti%20English.pdf>

[57] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 94.

Naṅdangarh is located in the Champāran district of Bihar. Numerous earthern and brick *stūpas*[58] were found here, as well as an Aśokan pillar. Cunningham carried out some excavation work in 1862 but does not dwell on the monumental terraced brick *stūpa*, later excavated by N. G. Majumdar between 1935 and 1937 (Figs. A6 to A8).[59] Altogether the *stūpa* has six plain terraces; three polygonal, and three circular, and measures approximately 24 m in height and 152.4 m in diameter.[60] Deva writes:

> At the centre of the mound at a depth of 14 ft was a truncated brick altar. At a depth of 35 ft was a 12 ft high brick stupa of polygonal plan complete with umbrella. Beside it was a copper vessel containing a Buddhist birch bark manuscript written in Brāhmī script of c.400 AD. The monument is assignable to this date.[61]

Deva calls it both the earliest and the largest know terraced brick *stūpa*.[62] However, it is preceded by the Chandravaram *stūpa* in Andhra Pradesh. The Naṅdangarh *stūpa* is likely to have been the prototype for the later monument at Kesariyā, located around 84 km to the southeast.

A7. A view of the Naṅdangarh stūpa. Photograph courtesy of Peter Sharrock.

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[58] Ibid., *Four Reports*, p. 69.

[59] N. G. Majumdar, 'Explorations at Lauriya Nandangarh', in *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1935-6*, ed. by J. F. Blakiston (Delhi, 1938), pp. 55-66; and N. G. Majumdar, 'Excavations at Lauriya Nandangarh' in *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1936-7,* ed. by K. N. Dikshit (Delhi, 1940), pp. 47-50.

[60] Deva, p. 24.

[61] Ibid., p. 24.

[62] Ibid., p. 24.

A8. The Naṅdangarh stūpa. Photograph courtesy of Swati Chemburkar.

Mansar: Pravarapura/ MNS II

The ruins of two extraordinary terraced brick structures, as well as several other smaller foundations, have been found close to the village of Mansar in the Nagpur

District, Maharasthra. The site is only 6 km west of the more famous Rāmagiri hill, visible from the archaeological site.

One of the terraced structures is located on a rocky hill, the Hiḍimbā Tekḍī. This site is known as MNS III and will be explored in the following section. The complex at the base of the hill is known as MNS II and was excavated by Dr. Nath in 1994-5 (Fig. A9). MNS II was originally called Pravarapura and may have been a royal residence; MNS III or Pravareśvara was a temple or state sanctuary dedicated to Śiva.[63] Excavation work at Mansar continued from 1998, funded by the Bodhisattva Nagarjun Smarak Sanstha Va Anusadhan Kendra with the permission of the ASI.[64] The excavations were conducted under the direction of A. K. Sharma and Jagat Pati Joshi. Giant Bodhisattva images were subsequently erected along the wall enclosing the site despite the total absence of Buddhist finds.

A9. MNS II at Mansar.

MNS II is a large structure surrounded by a fortification wall measuring 124 m from east to west and 110 m from north to south.[65] At the centre of the enclosure stands a

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[63] Bakker, 'Royal Patronage', p. 471.
[64] Joshi and Sharma, p.1.
[65] Ibid., p.9.

15 m high pyramidal building with three terraces (Figs. A10 to A12).[66] In front of the building, to the west, is a vast pillared *maṇḍapa* measuring 23 m in length and 19.5 m in width (Figs. A13 to A15). There are 42 substantial ruined pillars in the *maṇḍapa* surrounded by an enclosure wall measuring 29 x 29 m.[67] The terraces sit on a large *adhiṣṭhāna* measuring 51 m from east to west and 44 m from north to south. Like the two terraced monuments at Ahichhatrā, the *adhiṣṭhāna* had a 'bastion like' square projection on each corner.[68] The *adhiṣṭhāna* is embellished with simple pilasters bearing traces of white-coloured lime plaster, while the intermittent recesses were red.[69]

A10. The adhiṣṭhāna or basement terrace of MNS II at Mansar.

Similar to the terraced temples at Ahichhatrā and Pawāyā, Pravarapura has a projection on the west. Thus it faces west, towards the temple situated on the hill and the tank. Two staircases on the west lead from ground level to the pinnacle of the structure. According to the excavators, the uppermost platform had rooms resting on wooden planks.[70] On the northeastern corner beneath the wall of the *adhiṣṭhāna*, a square *havana-kund* was found full of ash.[71] Foundations of other rooms surround the

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[66] Ibid., p.20.
[67] Ibid., p.9.
[68] Ibid., p.20.
[69] Ibid., p.9.
[70] Ibid., p.20.
[71] Ibid., p.21.

terraced structure. Tiles found in this area suggest that the building may have had a tiled roof. Sculptural fragments found at this site include depictions of Narasiṃha riding on Garuḍa, an *ekamukhaliṅgaṃ*, Kārttikeya riding a peacock, Lajjā-Gaurī, Kubera, and Nandi.[72]

The Vākāṭaka ruler Pravarasena II (r. 419-450 CE), a fervent devotee of Maheśvara, built both of the terraced structures at Mansar at some point between the eleventh and sixteenth year of his reign.[73] It is worth mentioning here that Pravarasena II was the son of Prabhāvatī, daughter of the Gupta ruler, Candragupta II and his Nāga queen, Kuberanāga. Prabhāvatī was married to the Vākāṭaka king Rudrasena II before his untimely death.

A11. A warped staircase on the MNS II monument at Mansar.

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[72] Ibid., p.10.
[73] Bakker, 'Royal Patronage', p.471.

A12. *The apex of MNS II at Mansar.*

A13. *The excavated ruins of MNS II at Mansar, viewed from the pinnacle of the monument.*

A14. In front of the pillared maṇḍapa at MNS II, Mansar.

A15. Steps at the foot of the terraced MNS II monument at Mansar.

Mansar: Pravareśvara/ MNS III

The state sanctuary, or Śiva temple constructed on the roughly triangular-shaped Hiḍimbā Tekḍī hill, commands spectacular views over the giant lotus strewn tank to the west, and over Pravarapura, the royal residence, to the east. Of the early Indian temples, this one is surely among the most unique and fantastical.

A16. The wall of the basement terrace of MNS III at Mansar.

A17. At the top of the terraced Śiva monument (MNS III) at Mansar.

Rather than being levelled, the large, rounded rocks of the hill have been incorporated into the architecture. At least one of the boulders is a *svayaṃbhu* (self-manifested) with brick walls on three sides and a *vedi* in front (Fig. A17).[74] The uppermost platform is flat, and stone foundations of a shrine were found.[75] The lowermost terrace has an extraordinary wall with octagonal projections (Fig. A16). A more conventional *adhiṣṭhāna* juts out on the western side of the monument (Fig. A19). There are several small shrines on the terraces. Some of these shrines once held *liṅgas*, while red sandstone sculptures of Śiva and Pārvatī and Umāmaheśvara were found in other shrines.[76] Two of the shrines are reached by flights of steps in a playful and unique zigzag design (Fig. A20).[77]As with other pyramidal structures, the terraces are built from brick boxes filled with debris and boulders. A natural cave is situated above one of the octagonal bastions, apparently large enough to seat 25 to 30 people (Fig. A18). This cave looks out towards the Satpura mountain range.[78]

In 1972, the splendid stone sculpture described in Chapter 9 depicting a seated, four-armed male of dwarf-like proportions was found on the Hiḍimbā Tekḍī. Prior to this, other stone sculptures had been found at this location, but their whereabouts are unknown.[79] On the southern side of the structure, numerous sculptural fragments were found, as well as Vākāṭaka inscriptions.[80] Sealings were also discovered in another area of the temple complex with Brāhmī characters of the fifth century. Some inscriptions read '*Pravareshvarasya.*'[81] Field archaeology conducted by Harriet Lacey (Durham University) over the past three years has not bought to light anything (pottery, sculpture, etc.) dating prior to the Vākāṭaka period at Mansar.

The ceremony of issuing royal charters was performed here, as attested by the Pāṇḍurṇā Plates of Pravaresvara II dated to 441 CE.[82] It is important to mention that full excavation reports have never been published and access to findings such as pottery and sculpture is restricted. Moreover, restoration was conducted on the monuments before they could be thoroughly investigated by architectural historians and scholars.

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[74] Joshi and Sharma, p.17.
[75] Ibid., p.15.
[76] Ibid., p.15.
[77] Ibid., p.15.
[78] Ibid., p.16.
[79] Ibid., p.13.
[80] Ibid., p.17.
[81] Ibid., p.15.
[82] Bakker, 'Royal Patronage', p.471.

A18. A natural cave on the terraced monument MNS III at Mansar.

A19. Staircase leading from ground level to the shrine terrace on MNS III, Mansar.

A20. A staircase on one of the terraces of the MNS III monument at Mansar.

Harwan

The archaeological site of Harwan is situated near the Mughal period Shalimar Bagh in the Srinigar region of Kashmir. Stein identified Harwan as ancient Sadarhadvana, but there is little evidence to substantiate this theory.[83] In total there are ten ruins spread across different terraces cut into the hillside. On the uppermost terrace are the foundations of an apsidal temple. The courtyard of the temple was paved with large terracotta stamped and moulded relief tiles (see Chapter 7) (Fig. A21). A *stūpa* was situated on the lowest terrace, atop a triple-tiered platform constructed from rough-hewn rocks. Unlike the other pyramidal monuments included in this thesis, the platforms at Harwan are modest in proportion, and the dome of the *stūpa* no longer survives. Some of the decorative tiles from the courtyard of the

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[83] Fisher, Robert E., 'The Enigma of Harwan', in *Art and Architecture of Ancient Kashmir*, ed. by Pratapaditya Pal (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1989), pp. 1-17 (p.1).

apsidal temple were found relocated around the *stūpa*,[84] suggesting that the latter structure was built at a later date, possibly in the sixth century CE.

A21. A terracotta tile from the courtyard of an apsidal temple at Harwan, measuring 53 x 27.8 cm. The tile dates to circa the fifth century CE and depicts naked ascetics, geese, and male and female heads. Photograph courtesy of the British Museum.

Jetavana

The Jetavana monastery is located less than a kilometre from the southwest wall of the city ramparts of Śrāvastī or Maheth (Fig. A22). The monument has been excavated many times; namely by Cunningham in 1871 and 1880, Vogel in 1911, Marshall in 1914, Sinha in 1967 and Aboshi and Sonoda in 1997.[85] In his 1880 report,

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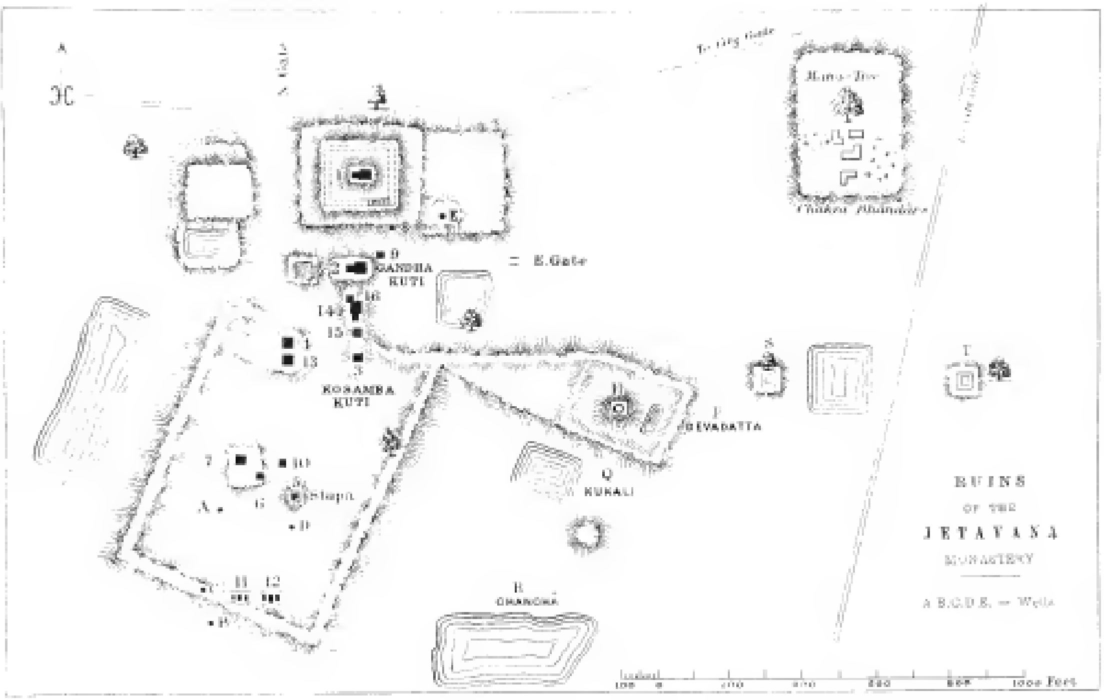
[84] Ibid., p. 7.
[85] Rees and Yoneda, p. 255.

Cunningham describes the monumental complex in detail. He unearthed the ruins of a brick temple situated atop 3 platforms.[86] The basement terrace measures 106 m sq., the middle terrace 61 m sq. and the upper terrace just over 24 m sq.[87] The temple at the pinnacle of the monument consisted of a sanctum (2.6 x 2.5 m) connected via a passageway to a *maṇḍapa* (7.5 x 7.2 m). Cunningham believed the *maṇḍapa* to be a later addition to the temple. The middle platform was lined with large monastic cells, while the basement terrace held a shrine.[88] Archaeological findings at the Jetavana site date from the Śuṅga to the Post-Gupta periods.[89]



A22. Cunningham's plan of the Jetavana ruins.[90]

Kesariyā

A monumental multi-tiered platform has recently been partially excavated at Kesariyā in the Champāran District of Bihar (Figs. A23 and A25). Cunningham surveyed the monument in 1861-2[91] and describes how the monument was topped by

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[86] Cunningham, *Report of Tours*, p. 82.
[87] Ibid., p. 83.
[88] Ibid., p. 83.
[89] Rees and Yoneda, p. 255.
[90] Cunningham, *Report of Tours*, Plate XXIV.
[91] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, pp. 64-67.

a solid brick *stūpa*, most of the surface of which was in a very poor condition.[92] The majority of the *stūpa* is now lost (Figs. A26 and A27). Large-scale excavation work began in 1997, directed by K. K. Muhammad with the assistance of D. P. Sinha, M. K. Dwivedi, S. K. Arora, M. P. Singh, and Avinash Kumar.[93] Six terraces were uncovered; the lowest terrace is circular and measures around a hundred metres in diameter. The upper five terraces are hexagonal. The 1997-98 ASI report only describes the lower three terraces; the first tier has a row of niches containing fragmentary stucco images of the Buddha;[94] the second has a star-shaped design; and the third, a serrated pattern; all levels contain Buddha images in niches. This arrangement recalls earlier Gandhāran *stūpas* with their bands of niches containing Buddha images (Figs. A24, A28 and A29). The base platform of the Kesariyā monument measures 123 m in diameter. The total height of the terraces is 37.5 m and the *stūpa* dome, in its current state, measures 9.38 m in height and 22 m in diameter.[95]

A23. The Kesariyā stūpa. Photograph courtesy of Peter Sharrock.

On each platform there was a circumambulatory path described as having a floor of brick jelly and lime-surkhi mortar.[96] Decorative moulded bricks adorned the walls. Brick sizes reveal that the structure may have been built in different phases during, for

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[92] Ibid., p.64.

[93] *Indian Archaeology 1997-98 - A Review*, ed. by Kasturi Gupta Menon (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2003), pp. 13-14; and *Indian Archaeology 1998-99 – A Review*, ed. by R.C. Misra (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2004), pp. 2-3.

[94] *Indian Archaeology 1998-99 – A Review*, p. 14.

[95] Swati Chemburkar,'Borobudur's Pāla Forebear? A Field Note from Kesariyā, Bihar, India' (Draft, 2014), p. 8.

[96] Ibid., p. 13.

example, the Śuṅga, Kuṣāṇa and late Gupta periods, but the dating is still very tentative.[97] The Chinese pilgrim Faxian, who travelled in India during the Gupta period, describes the construction of an important *stūpa* in the Champāran District by the Licchavi kings to commemorate the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha. In a forthcoming publication Swati Chemburkar suggests that Faxian was writing about the Kesariyā *stūpa*.[98] A massive expansion and alteration of the structure probably took place during the Pāla period, and Chemburkar suggests that Kesariyā was transformed into a representation of a mountain *maṇḍala* bedecked with Buddha images.[99] Moreover, she argues that the architecture of Borobudur in central Java could have been influenced by this *stūpa.*

A24. Damaged seated Buddhas in niches on the platforms of the Kesariyā stūpa. Photograph courtesy of Peter Sharrock.

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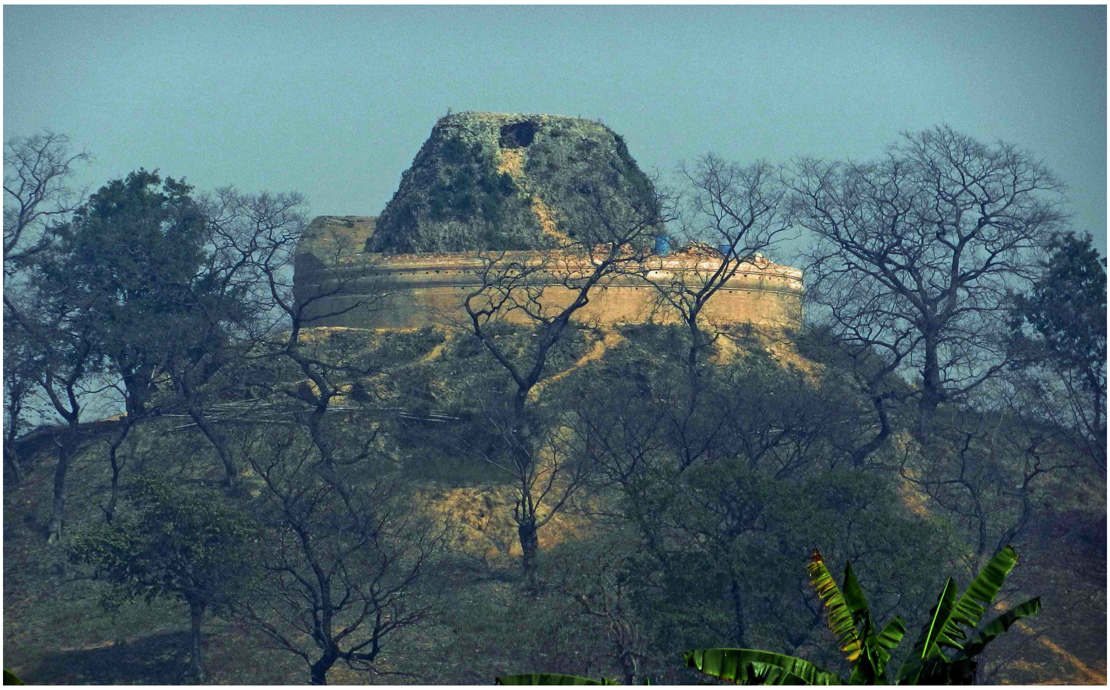
[97] *Indian Archaeology 1998-99 – A Review*, pp. 2-3.
[98] Chemburkar, p. 4.
[99] Ibid., p. 3.

A25. Google Earth image of the Kesariyā stūpa.

A26. The Kesariyā monument in 1934 with its hemispherical dome intact. Photograph courtesy of Peter Sharrock.



A27. The dome of the Kesariyā stūpa today. Photograph courtesy of Peter Sharrock.

A28. Broken Buddha image on a platform of the Kesariyā stūpa. Photograph courtesy of Swati Chemburkar.

A29. View of stūpa no. 6 at Ali Masjid on the Khyber Pass in Pakistan. The photograph was taken by Joseph Beglar in 1878. Courtesy of the British Library.

Gōkul

Situated in Gōkul, approximately 1.9 km south of Mahāsthān, in the Bogra Upazila of Bangladesh is an imposing four-tiered structure known locally as Laksindarer Medh Figs. A30, A31 and A32). The monument, measuring 80 x 55 m,[100] was constructed

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[100] Deva, p. 26.

from brick boxes, which contrary to the norm, are filled with earth free from debris.[101] N. G. Majumdar carried out excavations at the site between 1934 and 1936. Two staircases on the northeast were found, leading from the base of the monument up to the shrine.[102]

A30. Laksindarer Medh, Gōkul. Photograph courtesy of Coline Lefrancq.

A31. Laksindarer Medh, Gōkul. Photograph courtesy of Coline Lefrancq.

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[101] *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1935-36*, p. 67.

[102] Ibid., p. 67.

A32. Google Earth image of the terraced monument at Gōkul.

A chamber with an octagonal plinth of a later date complete with a human skeleton was found at the apex. Beneath the chamber is a polygonal plinth, only 30 cm in height, with 24 sides.[103] Majumdar writes:

> In the interior of the circular structure remains of a pavement were laid bare, and in the centre we came across a pit. 5’3” in diameter, made of two courses of bricks with regular facing. In the middle of the pit a stone slab was horizontally laid, measuring 1’8” x 1’6”… There are twelve shallow holes marked on the stone and a bigger hole at the centre which contained a gold leaf, 1” x 5” in size, bearing the figure of a recumbent bull … It appears that the gold leaf was placed here as the foundation deposit of a shrine … dedicated to the worship of Siva.

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[103] Ibid., p. 67.

> There is however no means of determining the appearance of its superstructure from the excavated remains.[104]

On the basis of the crudely executed image on the gold leaf, Majumdar assigns the monument to the sixth or seventh century despite finding several Gupta period terracotta plaques.[105] Deva on the other hand, dates it to the late fifth century.[106]The monument was significantly enlarged during the Pāla period.[107]

Govind Bhita

Govind Bhita is located in a scenic position on a hilltop overlooking a river in Mahāsthān, Bogra Upazila, Bangladesh. There are two Gupta period structures in this area of the ancient citadel, situated only 3 m apart (Fig. A33). The monument to the west is pyramidal, with three terraces. Deva describes the wall on the second terrace as having three sunken panels that presumably held terracotta plaques. The foundations of a sanctum on the apex measure 8.4 m square. Fragmented stone images of the Buddha were found nearby, indicating a possible – though very tentative – affiliation for the structure.[108] Some skillfully modelled figurative terracotta fragments dating to the Gupta period have been found at Mahāsthān, including a fine image of Sūrya.[109]

Cunningham visited the fortress city of Mahāsthān in 1879 and identified it as ancient Pundravarddhana.[110] The fortress measures 1524 m by 1371 m, and was protected in part by a river and in part by a moat.[111] Ruins encircle Mahāsthān for a distance of about 8 km.[112]The ASI commenced excavation work here in 1929. In 1961-68 Nazimuddin Ahmed carried out further work. Since 1993 a France-Bangladesh Mission has been excavating at the site.

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[104] Ibid., pp. 67-68.

[105] Ibid., pp. 68-69.

[106] Deva, p. 26.

[107] Monica L. Smith, 'The Archaeological Hinterlands of Mahasthangarh, Observations and Potential for Future Research', in *France-Bangladesh Joint Venture Excavations at Mahasthangarh, First Interim Report*, ed. by Md. Shafiqul Alam and Jean-Francois Salles (Dhaka: Dept. of Archaeology, 2001), pp. 61-73 (p. 70).

[108] Deva, p. 25.

[109] Image reproduced in Asher, *The Art of Eastern India*, Plate 41.

[110] Alexander Cunningham, *Report of a Tour in Bihar and Bengal in 1879-80. From Patna to Sunargaong* (Calcutta: Archaeological Survey of India, 1882), pp, 110-116.

[111] Nazimuddin Ahmed, *Mahasthan, a Preliminary Report of the Recent Archaeological Excavations at Mahasthangarh*, 3rd edn (Dhaka: Department of Archaeology and Museums, 1981, 1st edn 1975), p. 1.

[112] Ibid., p. 1.

A33. Aerial view of Govind Bhita. Photograph courtesy of Coline Lefrancq.

Sārnāth: Chaukhaṇḍī

A34. Chaukhaṇḍī monument in Sārnāth, Uttar Pradesh. The surmounting tower is a later addition.

The Gupta period Chaukhaṇḍī *stūpa*, is located in Sārnāth next to Vārāṇasī in Uttar Pradesh (Figs. A34 and A35). The monument has four terraces; the lowest is rectangular, and the upper three are square.[113]A Mughal period watchtower was built at its pinnacle in 1588 CE[114] to commemorate a visit from the Emperor Humayun.[115] Each terrace is entirely solid, constructed from brick boxes filled with debris (Fig. A36).

In 1836 Cunningham bore a shaft down to the foundations of the Chaukhaṇḍī stūpa in an unsuccessful attempt to find a relic chamber.[116] F. O. Oertel excavated the structure in 1905 and found that the outer walls had niches for holding images separated by brick pilasters. In their current state the upper terraces bear a simple frieze formed from plain bricks. The base, however, is adorned with narrow niches interspersed with pilasters, though since the base no longer extends to its original height, none of the pilaster capitals are extant. Finds at the Chaukhaṇḍī *stūpa* dating to the Gupta period include an image of Gautama Buddha and two bas-reliefs depicting leogryphs and gladiators.[117]

A35. Chaukhaṇḍī monument in Sārnāth, Uttar Pradesh.

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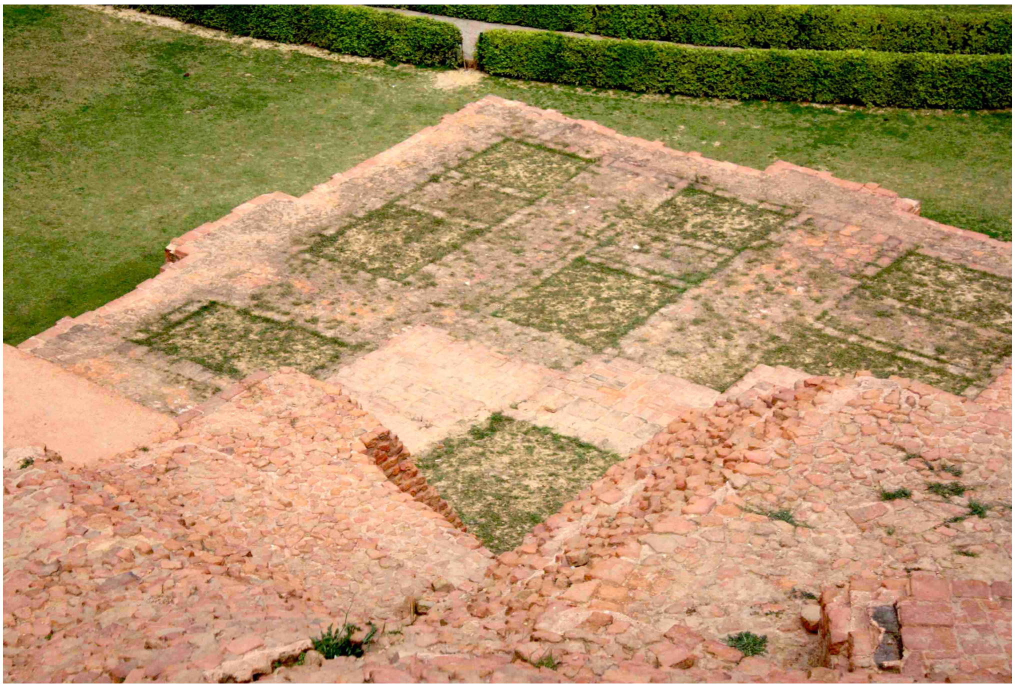
[113] Deva, p. 25.
[114] Ibid., p. 25.
[115] B. Majumdar, *A Guide to Sarnath* (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1947, 1st edn 1947), p. 26.
[116] Ibid., p. 25.
[117] Ibid., p. 26.



A36. The cellular plan of the platforms on the Chaukhaṇḍī monument in Sārnāth, Uttar Pradesh.

Mīrpur Khās

Henry Cousens excavated a brick *stūpa*, situated at Kahu-jo-daro, Mīrpur Khās, in the Sind region of Pakistan, between 1910-1911.[118] Originally the monument had two terraces and a dome. Now only the square basement terrace survives in a ruined state. The base, measuring 16.2 m square and 5.5 m in height, had a plain *vedībandha*, an *antarapaṭṭa* adorned with ornamental bricks, and a pilastered *jaṅghā*.[119] Above each of the niches is a *valabhī* style arch-hood moulding (an arch, or *candraśālā*, over two half arches), with some similarities to those on the *śikhara* of the temple at *Bhītargāon*.[120] Between the pilasters were eleven niches enshrining terracotta panels depicting seated Buddhas, three on the north, east and west faces, and two on either side of the entrance on the west (Fig. A37).[121]

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[118] Pratapaditya Pal, *Sindh – Past Glory, Present Nostalgia* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2008), p. 64.

[119] Deva, p. 25.

[120] For an image of one of the pilastered walls on the basement terrace at Mīrpur Khās, see Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, Plate 134.

[121] Pal, *Sindh*, p. 65.

A37. A terracotta relief panel depicting a seated Buddha from Kahu-jo-daro, Mīrpur Khās, dating to the late fifth or early sixth century CE. The plaque measures 68 x 47.5 x 16 cm. Photograph courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Bharat Bhayana

The Bharat Bhayana monument is located in a small village of the same name, in Kesabpur, Jessore District, southwest Bangladesh on the bank of the River Buribhadra (Fig. A38). A monumental mound was discovered here, measuring between 243 and 274 m in diameter, and approximately 13.7 m in height.[122] A terraced structure, built

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[122] Dilip K. Chakrabarti, *Ancient Bangladesh, A Study of the Archaeological Sources* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 141.

on a cellular plan densely packed with earth, was uncovered during excavations in 1985.[123] The monument has three platforms and was built on a cruciform plan (at least in one of its stages).[124] The foundations of large superstructure, situated 11.88 m above ground level were found.[125] It is not clear what the affiliation of this temple was, but a Śiva *liṅgaṃ* was found at the site.[126] It has been approximately dated to the fifth century CE on the basis of brick-size,[127] style, and clay mortar,[128]but nothing has been found there which can really substantiate this claim.[129] Excavations were resumed by the Department of Archaeology, Bangladesh, between 1995 and 2001. Like so many other brick monuments, the Bharat Bhayana has suffered from brick theft on a large scale.[130]

A38. The Bharat Bhayana monument. Photograph courtesy of the Department of Archaeology of Bangladesh.

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[123] Ibid., p. 141.

[124] Jaman Arif, ‘An Archaeological Exploration Report on Three Upazilla of Jessore District’ (unpublished report, Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka, 2011), p. 44.

[125] Chakrabarti, *Ancient Bangladesh*, p. 142.

[126] Arif, p. 93.

[127] Some of the bricks are 7.6 cm in height - a size typically found in the Gupta period. This is, however, by no means substantial or even trustworthy evidence by which to date a monument. See Chakrabarti, *Ancient Bangladesh*, p. 141.

[128] Arif, p. 22.

[129] Chakrabarti, *Ancient Bangladesh*, p. 141.

[130] Ibid., p. 141.

Sālban

The Sālban Vihāra is located on the Maināmatī-Lalmai ridge approximately 8 km west of Comilla in Bangladesh. From around the sixth to thirteenth centuries this region was known as the kingdom of Samataṭa[131] and was ruled over consecutively by several different dynasties, most notably: the Khaḍgas (*c.* 625-*c.* 710 CE), Devas (*c.* 750-*c.* 850 CE), and Chandras (*c.* 900-*c.* 1049 CE). An extensive Buddhist centre was discovered here during World War II when a British military cantonment was established on the ridge.[132] The military caused irreversible damage to the site by using the ancient bricks for construction, by digging trenches and so on. More than twenty archaeology sites on the Maināmatī-Lalmai ridge were subsequently protected under the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act;[133] however, further damage was inflicted on the site during the liberation war of Bangladesh when the Pakistan army dug trenches in several places.

The Sālban Vihāra, then known as the Salban Raja Palace mound, was surveyed in 1951 and excavated from 1955 by the Department of Archaeology in East Pakistan.[134] Incidentally, this was the very first excavation work to be carried out by East Pakistan following independence.[135]During the excavations, a shrine constructed from burnt bricks[136] was uncovered in a courtyard at the centre of a large monastic complex consisting of 115 cells.[137] The shrine was originally cruciform in shape, facing in the four cardinal directions, with arms approximately 52 m in length. Later, though, the shrine was rebuilt in an oblong shape, measuring 33.5 m (east-west) by 51 m (north-south).[138]

The cruciform shrine was built around hundred years prior to the monastic complex.[139] Its plan resembles that of the later *mahāvihāras* at Antichak and

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[131] Bijoy Krishna Banik, *Mainamati: Sanskrit Inscriptional and Archaeological Study*, (Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2009), p. 1
[132] F. A. Khan, *Excavations at Salban Raja Palace Mound on Mainamati-Lalmai Ridge, near Comilla January-March 1955* (Pakistan Publications, 1955), p. 3.
[133] Ibid., p. 3.
[134] Ibid., p. 3.
[135] Ibid., p. 6.
[136] Ibid., p. 7.
[137] Banik, pp. 45-47.
[138] Ibid., p. 47.
[139] Ibid., p. 47.

Pāhāṛpur.[140] It had at least two terraces. The basement wall of the shrine bore a continuous frieze of terracotta plaques depicting subjects such as swans, wild boar, peacocks, horses, elephants, and male figures fighting one another.[141] More than a hundred bronze sculptures were found at this site, most of them dating to the eighth century.[142]

A total of eight copper plates were found during excavation of the Sālban Vihāra, at least one of which suggests that the earliest phase of construction can tentatively be dated to the reign of Vainyagupta at the start of the sixth century CE.[143]Expansion and restoration probably continued until around the eleventh century.[144] Four of the inscriptions describing endowments to the monastery were issued during the reign of the fourth Deva monarch, Bhavadeva, in the mid-eighth century. Interestingly, a seal found at the site refers to the Bhavadeva *Mahāvihāra*. Frederick Asher suggests that the shrine was probably rebuilt during this period.[145]

Aphṣāḍ

A39. The Aphṣāḍ monument from the north. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

Aphṣāḍ is a small village in District Nawadah, Bihar. A large terraced structure was excavated here between 1973 and 1983 by a team of archaeologists including Dr Prakash Charan Prasad, Sarvashri U. C. Dwivedi, Narayan Chandra Ghosh, Jamil

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[140] Asher, *The Art of Eastern India*, p. 98.
[141] Banik, p. 47.
[142] Asher, *The Art of Eastern India*, p. 65.
[143] Banik, pp. 49-50.
[144] Banik, p. 53.
[145] Asher, *The Art of Eastern India*, p. 99.

Akhtar, Lakshman Prasad Singh, and Raghunath Prasad Verma, under the supervision of Sita Ram Roy.[146]

The monument has five rectangular terraces, the lower three of which have niches which contained stucco plaques framed by pilasters; the majority of niches are now empty and alternate between rectangular and keyhole-shaped (Figs. A40 to A43). The plaques extant at the time of excavation belong to the lowest tier and depict scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, placed in chronological order.[147] Jayantika Kala has explored the themes depicted on this temple and has identified the following episodes: *Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā with Guha*; *Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā*; *Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā Crossing the River Gangā*;[148] *Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā with Vālmīki*; *Bharata Entering Chiṭrakuṭa*;[149] *Bharata being made Rāma's Regent*;[150] *Rāma's Stay in the Forest*;[151] *Lakṣmaṇa Disfiguring Surpaṇakhā*;[152] *Abduction of Sītā*;[153] *Rāma Killing the Deer*;[154] *Rāvaṇa Visiting the Hermitage of Rāma*;[155] *Abduction of Sītā and Rāvaṇa's Fight with Jaṭāyu*;[156] *Sītā in Aṣoka Vātikā*;[157] and *Hanūmāna*.[158] The plaques are lively and detailed with some charming compositions though without quite the same delicacy found on earlier terracotta panels at sites such as Ahichhatrā, Pawāyā, Bhītargāon and Śrāvastī. Some of the smaller details in the panels are delightful; in the plaque depicting Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa crossing the Gangā, the boat is shown as being constructed from wooden planks nailed together – the nail holes clearly depicted; and in the same panel, the turtle and fish swimming in the swirling waters beneath the boat bring humour and liveliness to the composition.[159]

The pilasters are cruder than those found, for example, on the Gupta period brick temple at Bhītargāon. Whereas at the latter temple moulded bricks are used, at

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[146] *Indian Archaeology 1977-78 - A Review*, ed. by B. K. Thapar (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1980), p. 16.
[147] Kala, p. 20.
[148] Ibid., pp. 21-22.
[149] Ibid., p. 22.
[150] Ibid., p. 23.
[151] Ibid., pp. 23-24.
[152] Ibid., p. 24.
[153] Ibid., p. 25.
[154] Ibid., p. 26.
[155] Ibid., pp. 26-27.
[156] Ibid., pp. 27-30.
[157] Ibid., pp. 30-31.
[158] Ibid., pp. 31-33.
[159] Image reproduced in Asher, *The Art of Eastern India*, Plate 86.

Aphṣāḍ the pilasters are made from stucco incised with typical pillar motifs. The terraces of the monument are constructed from brick boxes or chambers filled with silt and clay.[160] The brick walls and floors are laid in mud mortar.[161] On each platform there was a circumambulatory path[162] with a staircase on the west side of the structure.[163] Towards the east of the first platform is a row of five small shrines.[164] The edifice is 15 m high.[165]

A40. Shrine terrace of the Viṣṇu monument at Aphṣāḍ. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

A temple would have originally been situated at the pinnacle of the monument. Several surviving sculptures, including a large zoomorphic image of Varāha (similar to the one at Eraṇ), images of Viṣṇu, and *cakrapuruṣas*[166]indicate that this lost shrine

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[160] *Indian Archaeology 1982-83- A Review*, ed. by M. S. Nagaraja Rao (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1985), p. 26.
[161] *Indian Archaeology 1973-74 - A Review*, p. 11.
[162] *Indian Archaeology 1982-83- A Review*, p. 26.
[163] *Indian Archaeology 1973-74 - A Review*, p. 11.
[164] *Indian Archaeology 1980-81 - A Review*, ed. by Debala Mittra (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1983), p. 9.
[165] *Indian Archaeology 1982-83- A Review*, p. 26.
[166] Deva, p. 113.

was dedicated to Viṣṇu or one of his avatars.[167] In contrast to the stucco reliefs, the basalt sculptures are graceful and sophisticated. Ruined foundations of a *garbhagṛha* (sanctum) survive on the top terrace as well as several damaged stone sculptures.

An important inscription of King Ādityasena, the eighth ruler of the Later Gupta dynasty of Magadha was found in the vicinity of the temple on Mandar Hill. The inscription describes how the king built a temple to Viṣṇu, while his wife, Konadēvī, built a tank, and his mother Mahādēvī Srīmatī built a religious college.[168] Though the inscription is not dated, we know Ādityasena was ruling in the year 672 CE,[169] so the temple would have been constructed not long before or after this date.

A41. A view of the second and third terraces of the Viṣṇu monument at Aphṣāḍ. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

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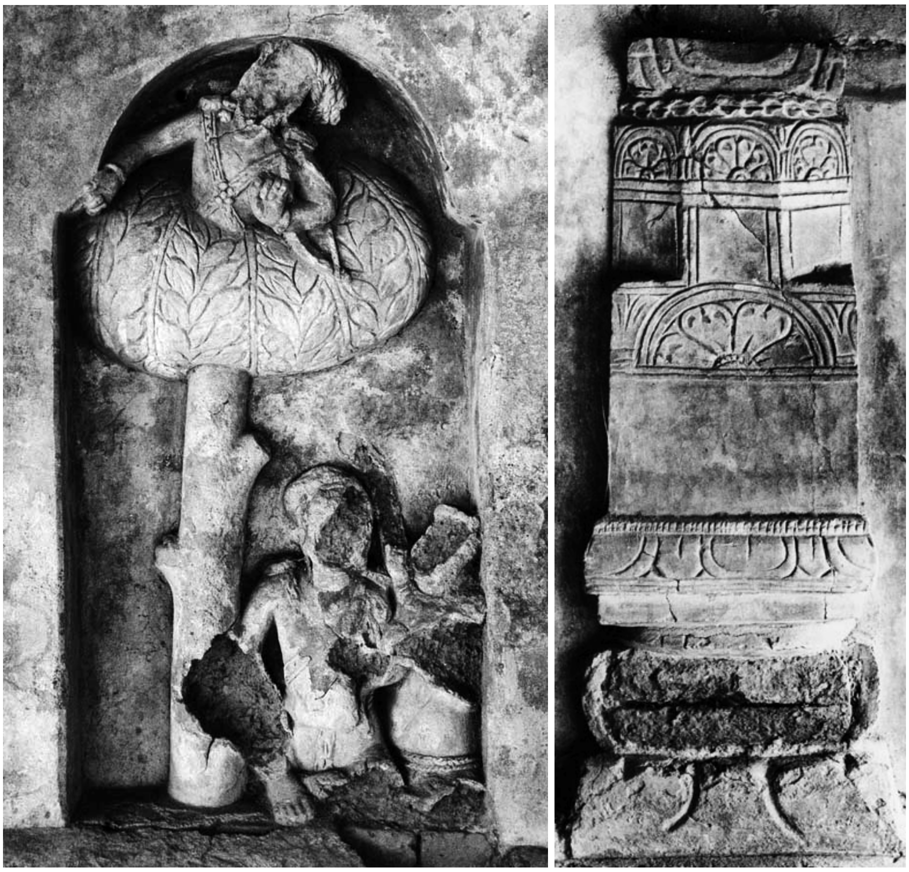
[167] Images reproduced in Asher, *The Art of Eastern India*, Plates 87-89.
[168] Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Guptas*, p. 207.
[169] Deva, p. 113.

A42. Detail of a relief panel in a niche on the northeast corner of the jagatī of the Viṣṇu monument at Aphṣāḍ. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.



A43. (a) Detail of a relief panel in a niche on the northeast corner of the jagatī of the Viṣṇu monument at Aphṣāḍ; (b) fragment of a stucco-coated pilaster on the northeast corner of the jagatī of the Viṣṇu monument at Aphṣāḍ. Both photographs courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

A44. View of the stucco-coated jagatī on the northeast corner of the Viṣṇu monument at Aphṣāḍ. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

Nālandā

A45. Nālandā Site no.3. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

Site no. 3 at Nālandā in Baḍgāon District, Bihar, was excavated between 1915 and 1937, and again between 1974 and 1982. Deva describes this peculiar, and somewhat haphazard brick monument as a ‘tangled mass of buildings’, in total reaching a height of 31 m (Fig. A45). He continues, ‘this accumulation of seven successive stūpas and temples, built one above the other, enlarged the dimensions of the temple at each stage.’[170] Parts of layers of construction have been left exposed by the excavators.[171] As a result, the structure is now fairly incomprehensible. Staircases belonging to each of the last three phases of the monument are still extant. The fifth phase of enlargement, dated to the Gupta period, was the most dramatic, according to Deva, with the addition of a giant terrace, 6.09 m high and 15.24 m sq.[172] Traces of further *bhadrapīṭhas* still exist on parts of the monument, and on this basis I would estimate that there were originally three or more terraces which have since been lost, rather than one unusually tall *bhadrapīṭha*. Two ruined towers are situated at the pinnacle of the structure. The mouldings and the Buddha sculptures placed in niches were coated in stucco, as were the walls of the stairway. [173]

Itakhola Murā

The Itakhola Murā is located in Kotbari, Mаināmatī, Bangladesh. Excavation began on this site in 1986 and concluded in 1992. The ruins of a Buddhist temple, a *stūpa*, and a monastery, all built from brick, were uncovered. The *stūpa* at least had apparently undergone five stages of construction. The three pyramidal platforms of the temple, together with a large central staircase, are extant. The earliest stages of this complex date to around the sixth or seventh century CE.[174]

Koṭilā Murā

Koṭilā Murā is an interesting site located in the Maināmatī hills, Bangladesh. Excavation work began here in 1956. Three brick *stūpas* were found positioned on a tall platform with nine smaller *stūpas* situated behind them.[175]In the past this was called the *Tri-Ratna vihāra* (the three jewels of Buddhism).[176] The *stūpas* are reached via a substantial staircase located on the west face of the platform. The staircase has

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[170] Deva, p. 108.
[171] James C. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent* (Yale: Yale university Press, 1994, 1st edn 1986), p. 203.
[172] Deva., p. 108.
[173] Harle, *The Art and Architecture*, p. 203.
[174] Banik, p. 59.
[175] Asher, *The Art of Eastern India*, p. 63.
[176] Ibid., p. 63.

three tiers and crosses three rectangular entrance halls, one for each *stūpa*.[177]The three *stūpas* have a square base with decorative brickwork and a central projection on each side, topped by a squat cylindrical drum and a dome.[178]

The central *stūpa* has a deep shaft within which numerous miniature *stūpas* were discovered, some dating to the seventh century CE, which may indicate the date of the first phase of construction at this site.[179] Among the findings in the shaft were two beautiful carved sandstone plaques, one of which depicts Buddha in *dharmacakra mudrā* seated on a lotus, surrounded by smaller figures; and the other, a four-armed Bodhisattva also seated on a lotus.[180]Two copper plates were found at this site and record the names of three Khaḍga kings who were probably ruling towards the end of the seventh century, at around the same time that Ādityasena, who built the terraced Viṣṇu temple at Aphṣāḍ, was ruling in neighbouring Maghada and Gauḍa.[181]

Asher writes that both the plan of the *stūpas* and the style of the many bronzes found at Maināmatī suggest that this region was culturally disparate from the rest of Eastern India.[182] However, in its adoption of the terraced form for many of its structures, this area was following a well-established architectural mode found across Northern India, parts of central India, and the Silk Road. It is possible that the Buddhist complexes in Maināmatī had an influence on the plan of the later cruciform *vihāras* at Antichak, and Pāhāṛpur.

Savar Harish Chandra Rajar Bari

Savar is located approximately 24 km to the northwest of Dhaka in Bangladesh, on the banks of the River Bangshi.[183] It was once a bustling area for trade and commerce, which might explain the proliferation of archaeological sites situated here.[184] Of interest to us are the ruins of a terraced brick *stūpa* known as the *Harish Chandra Rajar Bari*, located in the village of Majidpur.[185] The mound had, unfortunately, been

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[177] Banik, p. 56.
[178] Banik, p. 57.
[179] Banik, p. 57.
[180] Asher, *The Art of Eastern India*, pp. 63-64.
[181] Ibid., p. 64.
[182] Ibid., p. 65.
[183] Chakrabarti, *Ancient Bangladesh,* p. 138.
[184] Ibid., p. 138.
[185] Ibid., p. 140.

the victim of continuous brick theft and was in a poor state at the time of its excavation in 1989. The monument measures 26.39 m square and is enclosed by a wall measuring 38.53 m square.[186] The *stūpa* has three platforms and in its current state rises to a height of about 5.7 m.[187] The monument was constructed in at least two phases, with offsets being added on all sides of the terraces in the second phase. A new boundary wall with offsets was also built.[188]A monastery, excavated in 1990, is located nearby and several bronze Buddhist sculptures were found here. The *stūpa* and monastery have been dated to the seventh or eighth century CE, but there was earlier occupation at the site – possibly during the Gupta period.[189]

Antichak

The *mahāvihāra* at Antichak, Bhāgalpur District, Bihar, was excavated between 1960 and 1981. The work was carried out by B. P. Sinha and Dr. R. C. P. Singh,[190] and later by Dr. B. S. Verma, assisted by B. N. Prasad and S. C. Saran.[191] A terraced brick *stūpa* built over an earlier brick structure,[192] and a large monastic complex with 208 cells, mostly in a poor state of preservation, were bought to light.[193] The two-tiered terraced monument is cruciform in plan and has chambers facing in the four cardinal directions.[194] The chambers originally housed large terracotta images of the Buddha.[195]

The walls of both terraces were adorned with terracotta plaques. Those on the inner walls of the lower terrace depicted decorative and symbolic motifs such as cows, *kalasa* and *cakra*.[196] The outer walls of the lower terrace held plaques mostly illustrating Buddhist deities or unidentified figures in kneeling postures with palms held together.[197] Reliefs situated on the second terrace depict stories of the Buddha's

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[186] Ibid., p. 141.
[187] Ibid., p. 140.
[188] Ibid., p. 141.
[189] Ibid., p. 141.
[190] *Indian Archaeology 1960-61 – A Review*, ed. by A. Ghosh (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1961), p. 3.
[191] *Indian Archaeology 1971-72 – A Review*, p. 4.
[192] Ibid., pp. 4-5.
[193] Archaeological Survey of India, Patna Circle <http://www.asiexbrpatna.bih.nic.in/antichak.htm>
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid.
[196] *Indian Archaeology 1965-66, A Review,* p. 7.
[197] Ibid., p. 7.

life, female figures, animals and votive *stūpas*.[198] Numerous stone, terracotta and bronze sculptures were found, portraying the Buddha, Bodhisattvas and Hindu deities. The limbs of most of the characters in the reliefs are slack and disproportioned. In contrast, the facial features are graceful, serene and well executed.

Many inscribed terracotta votive *stūpas* were located on the circumambulatory paths of the structure.[199] Based on the inscriptions, the *stūpa* and monastery can be dated to the Pāla period, between the eighth and eleventh centuries CE.[200] The rulers of the Pāla dynasty propagated Buddhism in eastern India, building several great monasteries, most notably those at Nālandā, Somapura (Pāhāṛpur), Jagaddala, Trikaṭuka, Uddaṇḍapura and Vikramaśīla.[201] The monastery at Antichak is thought to be Vikramaśīla, and an inscribed copper seal found at the site bearing the legend, *vikramasya*, tentatively supports this.[202] The Tibetan scholars, Tāranātha and Sumpa, write that Vikramaśīla was founded by the Emperor Dharmapāla (r.770-810 CE), or by his son Devapāla (r. 810-850 CE).[203]

Ushkur

The foundations of a stone *stūpa* on a terraced base surviving at Ushkur (ancient Hushkapura), Baramulla District, Kashmir, were excavated by H. B. W. Garrick in 1882 (Fig. A46). The monument is on a cruciform plan and was enclosed by a wall (Fig. A47). Xuanzang stayed at the site but does not mention the *stūpa*, which suggests that it had not yet been built. It is probable that it was constructed during the reign of Lalitāditya (r. 724-760).[204] Numerous terracotta sculptures were found at Ushkur, which resemble in style the earlier sculptures of Gandhāra (Fig. A48).[205]

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[198] *Indian Archaeology 1964-65 – A Review*, p.5.

[199] *Indian Archaeology 1968-69 – A Review*, ed. by B. B. Lal (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1971), p. 4.

[200] *Indian Archaeology 1971-72 – A Review*, p. 5.

[201] Alexis Sanderson, 'The Śaiva Age', in *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, ed. by Shingo Einoo (Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, 2009), pp. 41-349), p. 88.

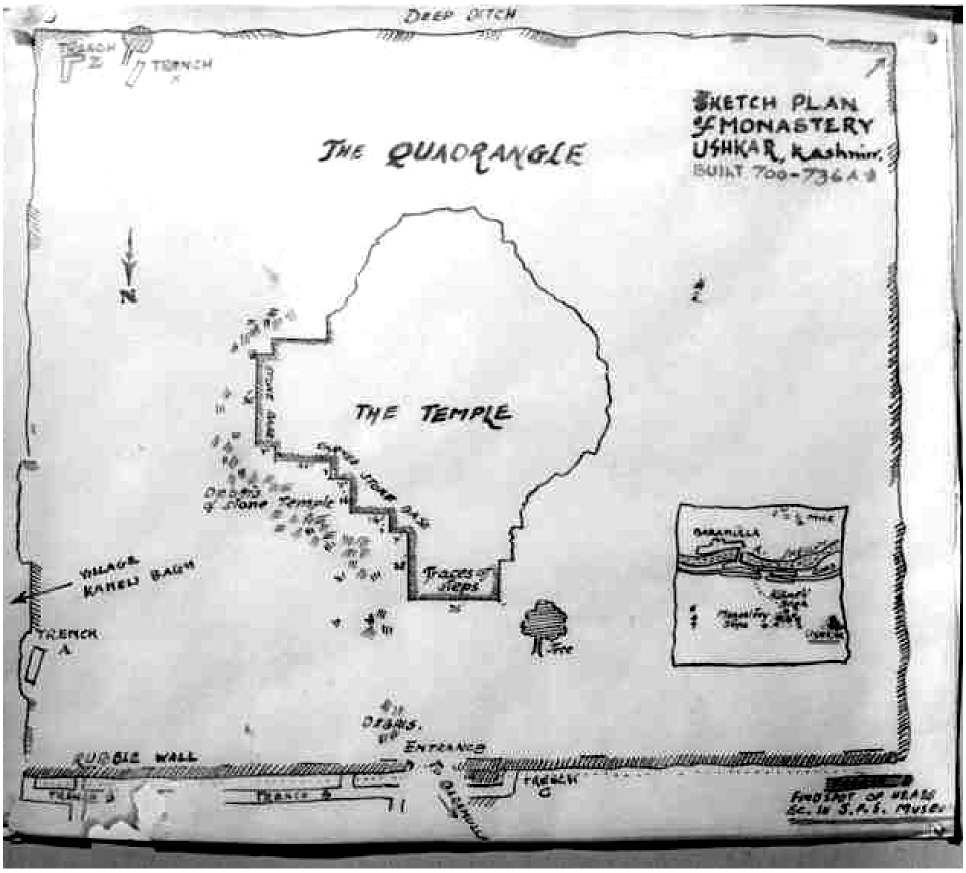
[202] Indian Archaeology 1973-74 – A Review, p. 9; and Sanderson, 'The Śaiva Age', p. 88ff.

[203] Susan L. Huntington, *The "Pala-Sena" Schools of Sculpture* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), p. 160.

[204] Robert E. Fisher, 'Buddhist Architecture', in *Art and Architecture of Ancient Kashmir*, ed. by Pratapaditya Pal (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1989), pp. 17-28 (p. 22).

[205] The British Museum has a sizeable collection of terracottas from Ushkur.

A46. The Ushkur Stūpa mound prior to excavation. The photograph was taken by John Burke in 1868. Courtesy of the British Library.



A47. Plan of the Ushkur stūpa. Sri Pratap Singh Museum, Srinigar. Photograph courtesy of the Huntington Archive.

A48. A terracotta head of the Buddha from Ushkur, dating to the 7th or 8th century CE. Photograph courtesy of the British Museum.

Paraspora

The foundations of an impressive stone *stūpa* on a terraced base are located on a plateau at Paraspora (ancient Parihasapura), District Baramulla, 22 km northwest of Srinigar, Kashmir. Parihasapura was the capital of Lalitāditya, and it is probable that the *stūpa* was constructed during his reign.[206] The *stūpa* is known as Chankuna, and is built on a cruciform plan.[207] Numerous stone sculptures were found, some of which may have been placed in a frieze around the basement terrace of the monument. There were also sculptures positioned along the plinth of the *stūpa*. As at Ushkur, many

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[206] Ibid., pp. 24-25.
[207] Ibid., p. 25.

terracotta sculptures were found here. Aside from the *stūpa*, all that remains of the ancient city are a ruined *caitya* and *vihāra*.[208]

Pāhāṛpur

Excavation work commenced at Pāhāṛpur, Nagaon district, Bangladesh, in 1923, and continued in 1925-26 and 1930-34. A vast temple and monastic complex with 177 cells was uncovered. Terracotta seals found at the site indicate that this was the Somapura *Mahāvihāra* founded by Dharmapāla.[209] The monument situated at the heart of the complex, has three tiered platforms and is on a cruciform plan. Surmounting the uppermost platform was a temple, the superstructure of which has not survived.[210] In scale and form the monument is similar to the *mahāvihāra* at Antichak.[211] Asher writes:

> If we may judge from the stone stūpa at the core of the Naṅdangarh structure, the massive stepped monuments at Antichak and Pāhāṛpur were probably crowned by the familiar bulbous *aṇḍa*. Alternatively they may have been surmounted by a *latina śikhara*, of the sort seen on a bronze *caitya* from the huge Buddhist hoard at Jhewāri in Chittagong District, in Southeast Bengal.[212]

The decorative scheme at Pāhāṛpur is both more extensive and more elaborate than at Antichak, with stone sculptures placed in niches around the now-buried basement tier, and with terracotta panels running in a frieze along the walls of both the second and third terraces. On the latter terrace there were two tiers of terracotta panels, one above the other, although many of these are now missing.[213] The panels are fantastically diverse in subject matter, but simplistic in style and execution; far removed from the intricacy and finesse of Gupta period terracotta reliefs. Most of the panels contain a single subject, such as a warrior, an animal, a dancer, or the Buddha. In contrast, some of the stone relief sculptures are complex and graceful. Many of the plaques depict

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[208] Ibid., p. 25.
[209] Ibid., p. 160.
[210] Jean-Yves Breuil and Sandrine Gill, 'New Research on Paharpur Buddhist Monastery (North Bengal)', in *The Temple in South Asia*, ed. by Adam Hardy (London: BASAS, 2007), pp. 127-138 (p. 127).
[211] Asher, *The Art of Eastern India,* p. 91
[212] Ibid., p. 91.
[213] Ibid., p. 91.

Hindu deities, for example, Balarāma, Indra, Yāma, Śiva and Krṣṇa.[214] A post-excavation photograph from 1930 reveals that the monument was unearthed in a poor state. Many of the terracotta plaques, however, were found *in situ* and were well preserved.[215]

Śrāvastī: Sobhnāth

The Jain Sobhnāth temple is situated in the southwest corner of the citadel of Maheth or Śrāvastī.[216] It consists of a rectangular triple-tiered brick platform, with a staircase on the east, and surmounted by a later domed temple belonging to the medieval period.

Vasu-Bihar

The Narapatir mound in the village of Vasu-Bihar, approximately 5 km to the northwest[217] of Mahāsthān, Bangladesh, was excavated between 1973-74 (Figs. A49 and A50). Two monasteries and a semi-cruciform terraced Buddhist temple were unearthed.[218] The terraced temple is oblong (38 by 26.5 m), and has three platforms. At the centre is a 4.5 m square *maṇḍapa*.[219] The base platform was adorned with elegant terracotta plaques; more refined than those at Pāhāṛpur and Maināmatī.[220] Among the subjects depicted in the reliefs are *haṃsa* (geese), celestial beings, *mithunas*, hunting scenes, *makaras* and animals.[221] The last phase of the structure dates to the tenth or eleventh centuries CE, [222] although neither the shrine, nor the monasteries were excavated to their lowest levels and thus may have earlier foundations.[223]

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[214] Images reproduced in Asher, *The Art of Eastern India*, Plates 220-224.
[215] See Lefèvre and Boussac, p. 93 (Fig. 2). See also Breuil and Gill, pp. 127-138.
[216] Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 337.
[217] Chakrabarti, *Ancient Bangladesh*, p. 100.
[218] Ahmed, p. 52.
[219] Ibid., p. 53.
[220] Ibid., p. 53.
[221] See Lefèvre and Boussac, Plates 42-48.
[222] Ahmed, p. 52.
[223] Chakrabarti, *Ancient Bangladesh*, p. 101.

A48. Ruins of the Vasu-Bihar temple. Photograph courtesy of Coline Lefrancq.

A49. Base of the Vasu-Bihar temple. Photograph courtesy of Coline Lefrancq.